WATERMARK, A SHORT-STORY CYCLE WITH AN INTRODUCTION TO THE GENRE AND SCHOLARSHIP INCLUDING A CLOSE READING OF THE TEXT

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ABSTRACT

WATERMARK: A SHORT-STORY CYCLE WITH AN INTRODUCTION TO THE GENRE AND SCHOLARSHIP INCLUDING A CLOSE READING OF THE TEXT

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Watermark, a short story cycle, as defined by Forest Ingram, Susan Garland Mann, and James Nagel, consists of twenty-five individually complete and interrelated stories and vignettes. Along with common characters and settings, the individual stories within *Watermark* resonate with themes of violence, love, cyclical behavior, amputated potential, self-denial, poverty, and imagination as escape. Through a process that Ingram calls recurrent patterns of development, these themes, amplified through repeated intertextual imagery, shape a larger narrative that conveys the developing artistic potential of Liz, one of many recurring characters. Typical of the short-story cycle, the title serves as a central unifying symbol. It recurs through water motifs and images of physical and emotional markings. The critical introduction conducts a broad survey of the genre's defining scholarship and analyzes *Watermark's* unifying structure by focusing on recurrent imagery, signposted themes, narrative patterns of *bildungsroman* and *künstlerroman*, revealing a critical aesthetic that parallels the central tension between "the one and the many" found within the short-story cycle genre.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

The Short Story Cycle: A Genre and a Story of Creative Potential

Since Forest Ingram inaugurated the critical conversation on the short-story cycle with his comprehensive study *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century: Studies in a Literary Genre*, scholars have sought to differentiate the short-story cycle from the story collection and from the novel. J. Gerald Kennedy separates anthologies of stories or authors' collected works lacking the semblance of a controlling idea from the short-story cycle (x). Both the story collection and the short-story cycle consist of multiple self-sufficient stories that often are situated around a common theme, time period, or setting. However, a major differentiating factor between the collection and the cycle is the short-story cycle's interconnectivity beyond theme and place. Stephen King's *Nightmares and Dreamscapes* illustrates this differentiation between the collection and the cycle: although King's stories are self-sufficient and express similar thematic features, one story does not inform or enhance an understanding of another as individual stories in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and James Joyce's *The Dubliners* do. Both of these well-known short-story cycles, as Susan Garland Mann points out, express a strong sense of isolation and paralysis, respectively, an effect that could not be achieved from one story, but effective when delivered through a "series of examples" (15). This differentiation relates to Mann's broad, yet most essential definition for the short-story cycle—that each story in a cycle has "simultaneous self-sufficiency and interdependence" (Mann 15). This generic requirement contrasts significantly with the novel as James Nagel clarifies the difference between the novel and the short-story cycle: "unlike the stories in a cycle, the subordinate units of a novel, its episodes or chapters, are incomplete in themselves, dependent for artistic completion on the other units that comprise the whole" (15). Nagel continues this explanation by pointing out that

novels of the nineteenth century were first published with incomplete chapters while individual stories of short-story cycles are consistently published as complete in and of themselves (15). Differentiating the cycle form from the novel, Mann compares the manner in which both forms create extended narratives, or "work on a larger scale" (15): while the novel, on the one hand, is often divided into incomplete chapters that, however organized, build a linear narrative, the short-story cycle is separated into individually complete stories, whose meanings become enriched with each story read and that come together to express as Gerald Kennedy points out, "tenuous fictive communities (15; xiv). The tenuous quality to which Kennedy refers speaks to the central tension of the short-story cycle—the "tension between the one and the many" (Ingram 19). As Ingram explains, this tension is "central to the dynamics of the short-story cycle": "every story cycle displays a double tendency of asserting the individuality of its components on the one hand and of highlighting, on the other, the bonds of unity which make the many into a single whole" (Ingram 19).

Most scholars of the short-story cycle agree on the genre's basic characteristics—a series of interrelated, interdependent stories or vignettes that become intertextually unified through recurring characters, motifs, setting, imagery, action, and/or theme (Nagel 15)—yet often disagree on the appropriate generic label. Although the term short-story cycle is commonly used, disagreement is reflected in the abundant labels scholars have proposed to more accurately represent the genre as indicated by Rolf Lundén's list: blended work, short-story cycle, short-story sequence, short-story ensemble, story novel, storied novel, composite novel, fragmentary novel, episodic novel, anthology novel, collective novels, para-novel, and rovelle (12-3). The confusion over generic labeling is related to the distinct characteristics scholars wish to emphasize. Both Nagel and Mann have followed Ingram's lead in preferring the term "cycle" as "cycle" acknowledges the genre's ancient roots in both oral and written traditions, citing such texts as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. Advocates of the label cycle agree that the short-story cycle is not a subset of the novel and should not be judged by the novel's aesthetic characteristics. Although Gerald Kennedy and Robert Luscher recognize the cycle's ancient roots, they view the term cycle to be misleading, finding the term sequence to more

accurately define the genre's sequential broadening of meaning (vii;148). Ann Morris and Margaret Dunn prefer the label composite novel because, for them, the term emphasizes "the integrity of the whole" and its "affinity" to the novel (5). Morris and Dunn believe the generic distinction should privilege the novel and not the short-story forms. They argue the generic label "short-story cycle is diminishing because the term "emphases 'story' rather than 'novel'" thus aligning the cycle with the lesser respected short story thereby situating the cycle with lower status than the novel, an unhappy position for book sales (5). Mann and Nagel disagree with this reasoning, viewing the apparent subordination of the short-story cycle into the novel as problematic that leads to critics judging the short-story cycle using inappropriate aesthetic standards. Ingram, Mann, Lynch, Kennedy, Luscher, Lunden, and Nagel advocate judging the short-story cycle by standards specific to its genre.

In defining the genre, Ingram specifies an author's intentions and the reader's role in unifying a cycle's stories into a whole: "*a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader's successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts*" (19). Lynch expands Ingram's definition, clarifying the short-story cycle and the novel as two genres with distinct reading experiences: although the novelist can scramble a plot's chronology, the benefit of the novel's structure is that it supports a continuous narrative of character, setting, theme and style while the short-story cycle resembles a piecing together of character, setting, theme, and other patterned devices (38-9). Illustrating the different interpretive experiences between the novel and the short-story cycle, Lynch writes that

> something essential to stories is decidedly un-novelistic, something, Edgar Alan Poe realized, that is closer to lyric poetry—the illuminating flash rather than a steadily growing light. However, reviewers and critics too often persist in approaching story cycles with an inappropriate aesthetic, with the wrong focus. The series of flashes signals a different code altogether from the steady beam. (39)

Morris and Dunn's argument that an alignment with the novel elevates the short-story cycle by "putting the emphasis on the whole rather than the parts" (6) reveals their failure to recognize the structural differences between novels and cycles—they see the steady beam and not a series of flashes. Reading the short-story cycle as if it had one steady narrative thread instead of a series of narrative fragments diminishes the genre they seek to validate as they neglect the central tension between the "one and the many" (Ingram 19). Overlooking the central tensions of a text makes them blind to many of the important recurrent patterns that move the cycle forward. It blinds them to discontinuities, which are central to the genre. An overemphasis on a continuous narrative informs Morris and Dunn's critical analysis of short-story cycles and offers one explanation for how they could simplify the complex narratives in *Love Medicine* to being understood as a narrative with "a clear picture," "characteristic of many Native American narratives" that emphasize "the connectedness of all things" (70). Morris and Dunn's critical vision is limited by their insistence on explicating one continuous, unified narrative—the triumphant Indian tribe. Without recognizing the imagery, motifs, and symbols that resist the "happy Indian" motif, Morris and Dunn view *Love Medicine* as portraying the emergence of "the collective protagonist. . .triumphant in spite of the appalling conditions of modern-day Native American life" (72). Hearing unified voices in a text that juxtaposes the conflicting voices that, as Nagel points out, has had "marginal success in assimilating into a transplanted European society" (55), Morris and Dunn fail to see the characters' emotional wounds having historical significance. They cannot recognize the always present "hints" or reminders of the unhealed historical wounds permeating the community: "the fact that Native Americans were stripped of their land and their cultural heritage, cut off from their traditional tribal legends and religious ceremonies, and severed from their sacred relationship to nature" as well as their native tongue (Nagel 55). Without recognizing the tension between the community's histories and the larger culture's, Morris and Dunn are forced to unify the collective "triumphant" voices of "feckless characters who are alcoholics, gamblers, felons, and sex addicts" as being "triumphant" over their own lives without regards to historical significance beyond Lipsha's ability to retain "the magical knowledge of the tribe" (72-3). Reading short-story cycles as Morris and Dunn simplifies the genre to dichotomies. Characters

are good or bad not both because both interrupt narrative cohesion. Simplifying the short-story cycle's narrative threads to unifying dichotomies is inappropriate, especially when applied in American racialized contexts. It denies the existence of disunity and resistance narratives in favor of a dominant cultural voice. Privileging the whole over its parts silences individual voices and limits a text's generic complexities, making it difficult to recognize in *Love Medicine* what Hertha Wong sees as a generic strength, to make assessable the tenuous relationships between the individual with "one's land, community, and family; and the power of these relationships. . .to resist colonial domination and cultural loss and to (re)construct personal identity and communal history on one's own terms" (173).

Seeing a "steady beam" instead of "flashes" when reading Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, a short-story cycle that deals with the experience of war, should prove problematic for the critic and for the reader—perhaps as problematic as trying to make sense out of war, yet a *The New Yorker* blurb describes *The Things They Carried* as having "the integrity of the novel. . . O'Brien's absorbing narrative moves in circles, events are recalled and retold again and again, giving us a deep sense of the fluidity of truth and the dance of memory." A narrative that continually questions the determinacy of truth, as *The Things They Carried,* exhibits "fluidity of truth" when the textual contradictions are made invisible by the need to infer a cohesive narrative. This point attests to an important structural distinction between the novel and the short-story cycle. While the aesthetics of the novel demands cohesion, a tying up of loose ends, the story cycle accepts ambiguity and indeterminacy. Readers looking for cohesive unity may find themselves disappointed or confused when reading a short-story cycle; a critic may show his or her frustration.

When critics privilege the "steady beam" effect over the genre's "flashing signals," it results in a rich text such as Erdrich's *Love Medicine* being described as having "structural problems" as Nagel's survey of critical reception indicates (Towers qtd. in Nagel 19). Although *Love Medicine* did receive early reviews that, appropriately, recognize its similar structure to Joyce's *The Dubliners* and Faulkner's *Go Down Moses*, some critiques reflect frustration when reading this modulating narrative form. Nagel highlights this frustration by quoting Catherine

Rainwater, who, reviewing *Love Medicine* for *Newsweek,* asserts that she "defies the reader's effort to locate a conventional plot—a temporal sequence of characters' actions traceable along a 'constant curve' with a teleological aim (the notion of plot as consisting of beginning, conflict, rising action, resolution, ending)" (qtd. in Nagel 19). Her frustrated tone indicates that she may not have recognized or perhaps was not willing to recognize in the short-story cycle what Ingram calls "the dynamic pattern of recurrent development" that influences a piecing together of narrative threads (20). Luscher describes how narrative development occurs through recurrent images, motifs, themes, plot patterns, and themes in Eudora Welty's *Golden Apples*: "we perceive the complimentary relationships between characters, recognize the network of mythological allusions, weave together various imagistic patterns, and evolve a sense of place as we read the stories. . ." (155). Weaving seems a fitting metaphor for tying together separate textual pieces into a recognizable pattern. Through such a metaphor, Luscher emphasizes the reader who becomes the essential pattern maker while Ingram's metaphorical description of the dynamic pattern of recurrent development emphasizes the operations of the textual structure:

> The rim of the wheel represents recurrent elements in a cycle which rotate around a thematic center. As these elements (motifs, symbols, characters, words) repeat themselves, turn in on themselves, recur, the whole wheel moves forward. The motion of a wheel is a single process. In a single process, too, the thematic core of a cycle expands and deepens as the elements of the cycle repeat themselves in varied contexts. (21)

Ingram's emphasis on "single process" is perhaps his way of defending the short-story cycle as a unified work. Nagel speaks to this when he writes that "the central issue for all short-story cycles is one of unity, the continuing elements from story to story that create thematic resonance, character, development, temporal succession, and intertextual coherence among brief narratives, each of which presents a conflict and a resolution within its own domain" (129). Considering the central meaning-making process when reading a short-story cycle arises from making connections and inferring the narrative thread that unifies the individual story into a whole unit

differs from the way the novel is read, with its focus on resolution, understanding the genre as distinct from the novel seems, intuitively, common sense.

As mentioned, the genre's structure is designed to provoke pattern-making efforts. Because of its structure, it requires an even more active reader than fragmented novels. Some readers, Morris and Dunn explain, will become "exhausted" (5) in such an effort while others will gladly work to connect the most disparate of patterns. Luscher relates the eagerness to connect the dots of an extended narrative to connecting the stars in the sky. As long as we have faith that the author has planned a tentative map, "[g]iven a title, a beginning, and an end, we will valiantly attempt to make sense of what initially seem disjunct images, unrelated incidents, or a static series of sketches" (154). The structural, textual, and temporal gaps, therefore, enhance reading experiences and do not reveal structural problems. As long as the author provides readers with signs of interconnectivity, the impulse to connect the dots is so strong that, according to Austin Wright any "apparent lack of unity is often a failure on our parts to recognize some unfamiliar possibility (103-4). The important point is not that readers will search for meaning in anything, but that authors successfully embedding recurrent patterns will affect a reader's desire to *want* to figure it out.

The structure of a short-story cycle plays an integral role in influencing a desire to understand an expanding story. As Ingram defines structure, it is multileveled, consisting of three main divisions that function simultaneously and interdependently: the static or "outer" textual form, the dynamic or "inner" or textual features, and the symbolic or suggested meaning (Ingram 26). The "outer" static structure can be thought of as the book's form or framework. This includes the arrangement of stories or their order. The outer structure "hint[s] at the broad outline of the cycle's movement and development" (201). Such "hints" are often in the form of framing devices: titles, epilogues, prologues, progressions in story lengths, or other such patterning (20). In contemporary American short-story cycles, however, the trend is for framing to be in the form of titles only. As frames, titles play an especially strategic role in focusing readers' attentions and in unifying the individual stories into a whole. Sandra Cisneros's literal house on Mango Street, for example, serves as the vehicle for interpreting the recurrent patterns (images, motifs, themes,

actions, et cetera) that enable the symbolic landscape formed in *House on Mango Street.* Building on Mann's observations, Kennedy portrays structure, such as titles and the order in which stories are arranged, as often designed to develop an individual character or composite character through a dominant theme, setting, or milieu (ix). Joyce's *The Dubliners* and Hemingway's *In Our Time* represent well-known cycles whose recurrent patterns and themes build composite characters that come to represent the emotional or symbolic landscape of a place and/or time.

Often an individual story will be signposted as important by sharing its title with the book's title. Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* exemplifies this point. In its corresponding story called "Love Medicine," the first-person narrator Lipsha, who was introduced in the first story, "The World's Greatest Fisherman," narrates for the first time, with a farcical tone unlike any of the previous or following stories. This change is important because "during those precious moments when the protagonist of a single story occupies the spotlight, he demands our full attention" (Ingram 22). Nagel describes Lipsha's narrative style in this story as the past comedic and stereotypic way Native American traditions have been depicted, subverting the serious Chippewa rituals used for physical and emotional healing into black comedy (46). Nagel finds this story's tone "absurd" and recognizes its unifying role yet fails to recognize the structural value in deviating from the established patterns (46). Although Nagel's analysis of *Love Medicine* is exceptional, and he points out in great detail the numerous plot lines Lipsha's narration begins to wrap up as well as the communal importance of understanding Lipsha's bicultural religious perspectives, his failing to interrogate the purpose of "Love Medicine" being structurally singled out causes him to read the events as "grotesque" thus missing the satiric implications. Through the signposted title and the unexpected narrator, the static structure sends an implicit message that "Love Medicine" is important to unifying the work—when that story is juxtaposed with Lipsha's absurd tone, the story becomes satiric, drawing meaning away from the stereotypical "Indian healer" motif to reflect on the narrative significance of the abundant smoke and smokescreen motifs as well as continuous imagery related to the land, to migratory birds, to dandelions, to time. Seeing a relationship

between these images, motifs, and symbols, "Love Medicine" grows pregnant with meaning and with symbolic significance—a significance not bound to the fictional world.

As mentioned, a generic requirement of the short-story cycle is for readers to create an extended narrative, drawing conclusions about characters, their lives, and their motivations. In order to make such conclusions, they must rely on their own knowledge of history and lived experiences. Perhaps, such reader involvement infuses fictional texts with real-world parallels. This possibility offers a lens through which little scholarship has been generated and prompts Nagel to call for additional inquiry into how the short-story cycle becomes unified through the consolidation of themes uniting American society (258). Expanding Kennedy's thoughts on the cycle's capacity to capture a cultural milieu, Nagel writes

> In a sense, the literary themes of immigration, ethnic diversity, the American Dream, cultural duality, language acquisition and loss, individual responsibility, the dynamic role of the past in the present, and the intergenerational conflict over the preservation of cultural values might be said to mirror the issues that are very much of the moment in American society. Literature is no small social force, in the sense that it provides a window into the soul of a nation, revealing both its anguish and its bliss, its promise and its ongoing internal struggle. (258)

Recognizing the genre's capacity for presenting individual/communal identities within the frame of the larger culture provides a lens into which to better understand the characters as images take on greater significance, simultaneously, radiating inside and outside of the text.

Such reading practice expands the notion of unity beyond resolution of a text in and of itself to one of indeterminate boundaries. This perspective provides a metaphorical relevance to viewing the genre as a spider web. According to Hertha Wong, "the spider's web is a common image to convey the interconnectedness of all aspects of life. . .as one individual filament cannot be touched without sending vibrations throughout the entire network, one story, although it can be read in isolation from the others, cannot be fully comprehended without considering its connection to the others" (172).

This point is essential in defining the short-story cycle as separate from the novel and story collection. Considering the definitions explicated in this introduction, there can be no doubt that *Watermark,* the creative work presented in this thesis, is a short-story cycle. It consists of twenty-five individually complete and interrelated stories and vignettes. Along with common characters and settings, the individual stories within *Watermark* resonate with themes of violence, love, cyclical behavior, amputated potential, self-denial, poverty, and imagination as escape. Typical of the short-story cycle, the title serves as a central unifying symbol. It recurs through water motifs and images of physical and emotional markings. Analyzing *Watermark's* unifying structure by focusing on recurrent imagery, signposted themes, narrative patterns of *bildunsroman* and künstlerroman provides a critical aesthetic that parallels the central tension between "the one and the many" found within the short-story cycle genre.

Most scholars of the short-story cycle recognize the genre's capacity for character development, especially maturation stories in the tradition of *bildungsroman* (individual coming-of-age) or *künstlerroman* (development of the artist). Mann characterizes künstlerroman as incorporating the typical conventions of *bildungsroman*—stories that present events tracing a child's development, potential agents for that development, and a series of tests and initiations such as the abandoning of a restrictive environment for a larger world (9). künstlerroman adds to these characterizations an "indication that the protagonist possesses exceptional ability (for example, sensitivity to language) and is attempting to develop this potential" (9). Nagel sees *House on Mango Street* as a coming-of-age story, pointing to the chronologically arranged stories/vignettes that reveal Esperanza's progressive growth (107). The similarities between Liz's development in *Watermark* and Esperanza's of *House on Mango Street* reinforce the appropriateness of reading *Watermark* in the tradition of künstlerroman. The subtle chronological structure choreographs Esperanza's expanding view of the world from her early dream of living in a real house with her family to having a house of her own where she is physically isolated from them, yet emotionally connected: "One day I'll own my own house, but I won't forget who I am or where I come from" (Cisernos 87). In the embedded poem "Watermark," Liz compares her past to a stain on the wall that she wishes to scrub only partially clean, demonstrating artistic growth but

also revealing her metaphorical intention of remaining, as Esperanza, connected to her family histories, yet separate from their totalizing influence.

An analysis of *Watermark's* structure reveals a number of clues pointing to the text being unified, structurally, through an adherence to *bildungsroman and künstlerroman* traditions. As Nagel argues that *The House on Mango Street* is unified by the maturation process of its central figure Esperanza, his analysis supports a close reading for how the structure of *Watermark* is unified by Liz's development as an artist. Established in the first stories of *Watermark* and *The House on Mango Street* are Liz and Esperanza's desire to "feel like something, to supercede the limitations" placed on them by their families (Nagel 109) and their environments, a typical impulse found in künstlerroman. "Potential," the first story in *Watermark* focuses on Liz's unseen ambition. It is narrated from a third-person voice, limited to Liz's perspective, that expresses a childlike tone with Liz wishing for super-powers. In the story, Liz is determined to discover the code for releasing the power within her, so she can serve her family's needs: "[w]hen she daydreamed, her powers didn't change anything big. She just made things better, for everyone" (20). The thematic importance of Liz's desire attains symbolic importance as she struggles to satisfy her family' needs and her own, desires that are repeatedly shown in opposition.

After reading the entire cycle of stories in *Watermark*, looking back to "Potential," we can easily recognize that the power Liz senses within her is her creative impulse. We may even infer that the harm she believes she causes grandma Bert from her escaping power reflects her misinterpretation of what her special talent is. Liz's failure to recognize the artistic sentiment as the potential she feels within parallels the particular manifestations of künstlerroman as it relates to feminine characters. Using Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* and *Beggar Maid* as examples, Mann describes the gradual process feminine characters go through to act on their artistic potential: "each woman's awareness of her potential develops gradually, and it is only in the final stories of each cycle that the reader is encouraged to take this potential or demonstrated ability serious" (9). Although Mann does not intend for Munro's texts to serve as models for feminine künstlerroman (9), her characterization of the tradition expressed in Munro's texts, nonetheless, matches Liz's development portrayed in *Watermark.*

Indicative of *künstlerroman*, Liz's potential as a poet is established near the end of the cycle in "Water Sign," with her embedded poem "Watermark." Structurally, readers are cued in to the importance of the final poem as it is signposted for attention. In the short-story cycle, as in poetry, when the established patterns of a cycle are interrupted or changed, we are signaled to pay particular attention. In this story, as discussed earlier in "Love Medicine," the narrative perspective, the structure, and the tone differ from the other stories, directing us to read closely for clues that pull *Watermark*'s implicit narrative threads together. "Water Sign" serves as a structural device that functions to "round off" (using Ingram's term) these narrative ties: Ingram describes the function of this structural device as a "draw[ing] together in a final story or series of stories the themes and motifs, symbols, and. . . characters which have been developing throughout" (23). Such rounding off occurs in the recognition that "Water Sign" is different from the rest of the stories. The epistolary form of "Water Sign," structurally, points to the story "Blood Line" as the main action in each story is initiated by the pink journals Liz receives in both stories as gifts; the letter Liz writes in "Water Sign" is addressed to D, who Liz names in "Blood Line." This typifies a structural component of many short-story cycles—the necessity of reading recursively. The unifying implications of "Blood Line" to the collection as a whole are not clear until near the end of the cycle. The structure influences our desire to think back, even re-read individual stories to clarify inferences as to the overall textual meaning.

The importance Liz places on choosing the perfect name for her journal, a name she feels will encourage her to disclose her true thoughts and feelings, reveals Liz's desire to express in words her personal views of the world, exhibiting the writer's temperament. By choosing a name that will provide a sense of security, Liz demonstrates her growing awareness of self. For her to write, she needs an environment where she will feel free from inhibition. Marveling at the freedom from which their family's houseguest writes each night in a spiral notebook, Liz exhibits a sense of awe for the writer's life.

After the houseguest gets evicted for the content of her journal entries, Liz attempts to erase the private parts from her own journal, but cannot. Instead she opts to keep her journal hidden away, under lock and key. The journal's private parts come to symbolize Liz's inner artistic

potential that like her sexuality she chooses not to gratify because she's been conditioned to think that both are wrong and dangerous. Liz knows "her words ha[ve] power" and learns that writing anything critical of the family would be perceived as a punishable, rebellious act. It gets the houseguest evicted and with the violence in the home writing the wrong thing Liz risks her personal safety. Although it may be unfair to say that Liz *chooses* to deny herself artistic expression when the restrictions of her family force her to do so, she does, however, choose to enter in her journal, "My Mother," the poem Mary writes for Liz to turn in for her a grade-school competition, which details Mary's strengths as a mother. It is unclear why Liz chose to enter that poem in her journal. One possibility is that her urge to write is so strong that she writes what she knows cannot hurt her if discovered or perhaps she intentionally inserts the poem, knowing her mother would eventually find her journal and read it. In either case, Liz reveals herself trying to please her mother. When Mary demands Liz retrieve her journal to be read aloud during a family game of cards and chooses to read "My Mother" instead of the masturbation entries, Mary reinforces the continuation of the acceptable family aesthetic. She accomplishes this by making Liz aware that her creative activities are monitored and by letting her know the types of writing that pleases her mother. Mary's action makes Liz wish "she were the kind of girl who wore [her days-of-the-week panties] on the right day" (43) –meaning wishes she could be like everyone else. This is an important stage in Liz's development as she not only feels that she somehow is different but she also recognizes that writing is a choice in opposition with her family values.

Liz is in many ways like Cisneros's Esperanza whose maturation and development rests on her ability to "assert her individualized desires" and resist "the life of her mother" (Nagel 109). The need to step outside of familiar patterns may be necessary for Liz and for Esperanza's growth; however, both girls love their mothers and their fathers and want to feel connected and have a role in the family. This desire is so strong in Liz that she will, in "Blue Blockers" subject herself to a beating in place of her sister because it makes her mother happy and will take a pummeling for her sister Marie from drunk teenagers who Marie had been provoking because her father told her it was her role to play as an older sister in "Love Stain." In that story, the cut she endures while running from the boys stains her coat with blood. As Liz's perspective at the story's

resolution is to recognize that "the blood would never come out," the blood from her cut to her wrist symbolizes the blood sacrifice that she will need to make, but it is not clear whether that sacrifice will be conforming to her family's restrictive environment or will be in resisting that impulse in fulfillment of her artistic potential.

Typical of maturation stories, characters often face obstacles they must overcome in order to develop. Liz's mother often challenges Liz's aspirations, often attempting to limit her growth. This is especially poignant in "Slamming Doors" as Liz's mother takes Liz to the pediatrician expecting a diagnosis that Liz is mentally retarded. Her reasons for suspecting Liz to be mentally retarded have to do with Liz's wild art project where she uses every color in the Crayola box and can't stay in the lines. While this seems a strange reaction for any mother to have, in the context of the family dynamic Mary's behavior can be viewed as a means to gain control of a daughter exhibiting signs of rebelling against the family's established patterns. That Liz feels "dread" of art projects" in kindergarten indicates Liz's apprehension over her ability to conform to established aesthetic standards—more plainly, she intuitively recognizes her inability to produce art her mother will appreciate. The content of "Slamming Doors" is important to the structural unity that reveals Liz's incremental development: she resists the opinion that she is unexceptional. She argues with her mother that she is smart enough to take college preparatory courses even though her mother believes she is not. That Mary believes limiting Liz's educational opportunities protects her from the external and often painful influences outside the family displays a major obstacle Liz must overcome in order to prevent stunting her potential growth as her mother has done to herself.

This theme of amputated potential is reiterated in generational patterns often revealing multiple factors in characters' plights. Mary's complicity in limiting her own growth is painfully evident in "The Interview" where her insecurities outside the home prevent her from accepting a job that requires no special skills and in "Winner's Circle" where Mary's childlike competition she feels with her sister prevents her from understanding the long-term ramifications of her flirtations. Although Liz does not explicitly recognize these issues, she does see their effect in her dreamscapes such as in "Dream Wall." In this dreamscape, Liz imagines Mary's life in the image

of "an empty tomb, an inconsolable void," but has no concept of its implication. In this dreamscape, Liz envisions the life laid out for her by her family. In that world her pink journal is "blood red," symbolically representing Liz's connection to both a writer's life and to her flesh and blood. Liz's space in the dreamscape is marked by motifs of family bonds, of sacrifice, and of individual expression. This story frames Liz's struggle to live passively, repeating the patterns of her mother and her aunts, or to act on her own behalf. The story indicates that her life path is not written in stone, as the date of her initiation appears vaguely as if "worn away with time" (44).

The oppositional connection Liz experiences between the act of writing and with her need to please her family create tension in many stories within *Watermark* and reflects the central opposition to Liz's maturation. Liz chooses to stand in solidarity with her mother and her grandmother, in "Blood Line," evicting the writer from their house, the woman's punishment for writing negative comments about Liz's mother—comments Mary discovers after rummaging through the guest's suitcase. Although Liz intuitively knows that it is wrong to read someone else's private notebook without their permission, her mother entices her to read passages that reflect negatively upon Liz, making Liz complicit in the process, thus forfeiting her individual values for her mother's. Liz recognizes the writer's eviction as symbolic when she stands with her family, downcast eyes momentarily looking up, to see the houseguest's "notebook leave the room and [to] feel the power of three generations drawing an invisible bloodline" (30). The notebook leaving the house symbolizes the movement of Liz's artistic potential, potential that is denied for the pleasure of solidarity with her mother and grandmother.

That Liz has an emotional reaction to the concept of writing is clear from her response to the houseguests' writing: "she wished she could touch what she imagined were pages and pages of blue covered marks. She saw herself running her fingertips down each page, front and back, feeling words so plumped with feelings that the color leaked through to the other side" (26). Liz's similar reactions to physical markings on the page in "Blood Line" with physical markings on her body in "Muddy Roads" create a strange resonance. Liz's feels a compulsion to touch, to feel with her fingertips the creative markings pressing through the page, and to run her fingers over the marks she creates after gouging them into her arm with her finger nails. The "trail of frustration"

Liz scratches onto her arm confuses her: "How could she have found such relief from scratching what did not itch?" (68). It is as if she marks herself with her own private expression, ridges expressing her feelings instead of words—the impulse to express herself uncontrollable even though she fears the consequences: "She had tried to hide the marks that had mapped her frustration, but her mother saw and knew and told her dad, who told her to go upstairs and wait" (48). The tension rises from the parallel between Liz and her father's strange "itch" that both father and daughter relieve through violence. The momentary omniscient narration reveals that Daryll "had felt the urge to use his fists all day. The veins inside them had pulsed with energy. . . like an intense itch hidden inside a casted hand, this urge could not be calmed in any other way but one" (16)—violence toward his own flesh and blood—a generational pattern that Liz begins to internalize. The image of the casted hand, resonates with metaphorical restriction, a restriction that Liz recognizes in "Fairy Tale" when she begins to imagine her father's identity as a violent man being shaped by his father. She even imagines her father as a poet using words instead of fists. From this vision, Liz makes the connection between violent, self-destructive behavior with poetic expression. Emphasized through imagery, the portrayal of recurrent generational patterns indicate the impulse Liz feels to mutilate herself is a familial habit of releasing artistic feelings through violence and self-destructive expressions.

Complicating these parallel themes of self-destructive behaviors, Liz against herself and Daryll against his child, is violence being viewed as an expression of love. This theme serves as unifying pattern in the cycle and within the family. In real life, love is thought of as the unifying pattern to family connection; however, in Liz's family, violence becomes intertwined with how love is interpreted and expressed and inhibits her development as an individual. *Watermark* exhibits this strange connection between love and violence in motifs of physical markings. In "Blue Blockers" Liz submits to receiving her sister's punishment, a beating that leaves bruises over her legs, because it makes her feel the connection of giving and receiving love. Her mother asks her to take her sister's punishment because she had wanted her own sister to love her with as much zeal, saving Mary from her mother's rage expressed with a milk bottle. When her mother and her sister buy Liz a pair of sunglasses as a gesture of gratitude for her sacrifice, Liz's bruises marking

her legs comes to symbolize their love: through the rose-colored glasses "she looked down at her sore legs. She wondered at the beauty of rose coloring. It brightened bruised stripes, turning shades of shame to colors from the heart" (41). This connection is not limited to Liz but to the other members of the family. Although Liz's father's motivation for beating his children, we learn, are not grounded in love, but self-expression, we can imagine that he justifies his violent behavior under the veil of love. The relationship that Liz makes between her mother's suicide attempt in "Instincts" and the movie *Basic Instinct* hints that love, betrayal of love, or lack of love instigates her mother's desire to kill herself. When making these connections, readers gain insight into Mary's motivations for defending Daryll in court: Daryll's brutal attack of a man in a bar with a bowling ball in "Raw-Headed-Bloody Bones becomes an expression of his love for her.

The imagery of physical and emotional markings are impressed upon the individual family members, reiterated over and over: the blue markings from the pen in "Blood Line"; the muddied gouge marks from Liz's fingernail; the deep, dark, blue color of the raised markings from Liz's dad's belt on her legs in "Muddy Roads"; Mary's black mascara streaked face in "Spit Tobacco"; the blood and sloe gin streaked floor in "Martyr"; the crack in Humpty Dumpty's egg-head, in "Fairy Tales"; the circle of orange skin that stings Mary's eyes in "Winner's Circle" and many others. These images reinforce the impression that each family member is marked with a family history of violence and stifled potential. The earlier critical discussion points to the importance of titles in interpreting thematic unity in the short-story cycle. And *Watermark* conforms to this characterization. As discussed earlier, "Watermark" demonstrates Liz's potential as a poet. In addition to this revelation, the content reveals Liz as being aware of the family's interpolation of love expressed and received through violent acts that she wants to change in her future. Considering the poem's implication of the possibility Liz sees in changing her future, by re-imagining the images of her past, Liz reveals not only her potential as a poet, but also her potential to change the self-destructive cyclical patterns reiterating through generations.

Liz comes to this awareness by escaping into her imagination. Shrouded by the darkness of her inner visions, she can metaphorically run her fingers over the emblematic watermark that defines her familial relationships, inferring what she chooses to value. Her imaginative escape is

reflected in numerous stories, but, most significantly, in "Martyr," "Dream Wall," "Fairy Tale," "Dream Creation," "Bridge," and "Illuminaries." In these metaphorical escapes, Liz creates a mythological landscape not bound by the rules of the natural world. Nagel describes this form of escape as typical of the *bildungsroman* that Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* exemplifies. Of this tendency, he quotes Marianne Hirsch, who writes, "'sleep and quiescence in female narratives represent a progressive withdrawal into the symbolic landscapes of the innermost self . . .Excluded from active participation in culture, the fictional character is thrown back on herself'" (75). Such falling back provides Liz with an opportunity to reconcile her individual desires with that of her family's, enabling her to change the delimitations of her individual identity and her creative potential.

Gerald Kennedy remarks that the lack of critical scholarship on the short-story cycle is "inexplicable" and conjectures that the genre's ambiguities deter scholarship (xi). Although a certain amount of ambiguity has its place in the novel, story collection, and short-story cycle, it is the short-story cycle's indeterminate structure that may be at the heart of critical inhibitions. It creates discomfort for critics and readers who imagine one possible story. Because forming the extended narrative demands the piecing together of repeated images, motifs, and themes, critics and readers must rely on intuitions and impressions to perceive the larger story. We must feel the symbolic resonance in order to recognize the patterns of meaning. Further complicating ambiguity that arises through such patterning is that often it is impossible to read a coherent narrative until the final clues found in the last few or the very last story.

For some readers and critics, the ambiguity arising from a genre rooted in poetry that requires readers' active participation makes for frustrating reading, experiencing the work as incomplete, a lesser version of the novel. Other readers welcome ambiguity; reading *Watermark*, these readers will recognize the images of physical and emotional markings as telling a larger story, will sense Liz's stifled desire to express herself, and in the final story, when she waves to the "someone" no longer preventing her from driving across the suspension bridge in her dream, we sense her waving goodbye to those who have inhibited her individual growth or perhaps her waving hello to new opportunities that she speeds toward. Nonetheless, we sense her

maturation. As Liz presses the pedal as far as it will go, "stretch[ing] her arm outside, feeling the soft hairs of the hot night air between her fingers, the bridge singing her new night song" (136), the recurrent images resonate. We can imagine that Liz has grown to understand the potential she feels in the first story as her poetic impulse. With this final image, we want to look back in order to perceive possible narrative strands we may have missed. Such desire makes the short-story cycle a genre filled with opportunities for imaginative pleasures and indeterminate meanings.

WATERMARK

Potential

Liz yearned for special powers. She practiced twitching her nose like Samantha on *Bewitched* and scrunching her arms and head like Jeannie. She felt the buzz within herself, but couldn't get it out. She told her best friend Beverly Hill what she wanted. Beverly, whose holy-roller family talked hellfire around the kitchen table, knew where her friend's wish could lead and warned Liz when they were in the lavatory.

"Liz, what if the devil hears you?"

"I don't care. I want my powers."

"Liz. . ."

Standing at the sink, Mrs. Wind reminded the girls there was to be no talking. Liz imagined herself able to talk without moving her lips, telling Mrs. Wind she was sorry. Liz stood at the sink, staring at the wall in front of her while her hands rubbed each other under a stream of cold water. Mrs. Wind tapped Liz on the shoulder as a reminder that her time was up.

Liz was determined to figure out how to turn on her powers. She tried pulling on her ear like Carol Burnett did at the end of her show. She closed one eye smooth while the other one was open, she winked, made clicking sounds, snapped her fingers, stuck her tongue out all the way like she did for Dr. Gregory, and when nothing worked she tried different combinations until it was time for bed. She asked her sister Marie what she thought the code was, but Marie laughed at Liz.

"Little girls don't have power, stupid."

When she daydreamed, her powers didn't change anything big. She just made things better, for everyone. She would think, "If I could get my powers to work, I would make Daddy

leave the saloon in time for dinner; I could fix pancakes for grandma Bert; I'd point and Mommy would have her own car." When she said her prayers at night, she asked for help.

"Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. Please God help me get my powers out. Amen."

Liz prayed like this until the weather turned cold, and she stood in her grandma's sewing room, paralyzed with fear. Even though a wall separated her from the happenings in the kitchen, she could see her mom, her aunt, and her grandma there. Grandma Bert dished up vegetable soup while her mom poured water in the glasses. Liz stood silent, feeling the hand that tightened over Bert's mouth. Liz watched her grandmother release the hot soup, spotting her dress red, as she tried to sit down. Bert gasped, but couldn't get any breath. She felt as if someone were squeezing her throat, tighter and tighter. Liz watched her mother. She screamed in that high pitched death tone, "Mom, mom, mom, mom" and heard her say, "call an ambulance" to her aunt. This took place while Liz watched what she should not have been able to see. Before the life squad got there, Liz gasped loudly, breaking her trance. She ran screaming into the kitchen where her grandmother sat breathing fine.

"I'm fine now."

"I'm sorry, Grandma. I'm so sorry."

That night Liz could not stop crying. When Mary came in to see what was wrong, Liz told her everything. How she had powers and didn't mean to, but it was all her fault. Mary told Liz that it wasn't her fault, that it wasn't anybody's fault. Liz knew her mom didn't understand what was inside of her. She could not be consoled.

Together Mary and Dot spied the pack of Lucky Strikes sitting between the medicine bottles on the kitchen table. Knowing what the other was thinking, both of their hearts skipped a beat anticipating adventure. They didn't speak. One girl picked up the pack while the other found the matches. They walked single file as if trying to look innocent. They tip-toed out onto the summer porch, trying not to make a sound. They couldn't look at each other because once Mary saw the giggle in Dot's eyes, she would laugh and Dot would follow, leading their mom, Bert, to wonder what was so funny. They held their breath, slowly closing the screen door, the one that always cried out as if it were tired, then they stood on their toes, a little bent at the waist, their heads turned, listening for grown-ups. The sight of these two girls of five and six years of age, dressed in ruffles and patent leather looking like cross-dressing-toy soldiers made an onlooker want to either see what they were doing or join in on the fun.

One soldier indicated with her eyes to move behind the garage where the trash was kept, and the other followed. With a cigarette between Dot's teeth, Mary tried to pull the match out of the match book, but when she looked up at Dot crossing her eyes to look at the cigarette between her lips, Mary let out a wheeze and crossed her legs, so Dot took the match book and tried to light the match by tapping and swinging her hand across the flint. At this, Mary did let out a real laugh and wiggled so she didn't pee.

"Do it." Dot tried to chastise Mary, but squelching her laughter for so long made huge elephant tears pop out of her eyes, so they both fell down laughing. Once they sat down with the wind blocked by trash cans, Mary lit the match. Both girls faced each other. Mary held the match to the tip of the cigarette in Dot's mouth, and they slowly stood up in unison. But nothing happened, except the match went out. This went on till they had used up half of the match sticks, and the high school aged boy next door yelled out his window, "Need a light," causing matches and cigarettes to balance on the vibrations of their screams. Then they ran for their mother, not knowing where that voice had come from. This time they let the screen door yell out and slam behind them.

Mary and Dot had many such adventures. They were always making up games. When the building next door, a bank, was being built, they would wander over and peek into the foundation, pretending to fall in.

The mounds of dirt formed from digging the foundation became mountains for Mary and Dot to climb. They shaped themselves into superhuman girls, who could jump from one mountain onto the next, their feet sinking in soft earth. One time they were so lost in their pretend world they hadn't noticed the frantic and fearful sounds coming from their house.

Bitsy, who was the oldest and the prissiest of the three sisters and who often was in charge of making sure Mary and Dot stayed out of trouble, ran over screaming for Mary and Dot to come quick *Daddy's dying*, but they weren't going to fall for that one. They both knew Bitsy couldn't stand for them to have any fun, so they told her to bug off. Bitsy was afraid of climbing the mound of dirt because she knew that the soil could loosen beneath them, and they would fall through and drown under the earth's pressure, so she just stood at the bottom of the imaginary mountain separating her from her sisters and yelling at them to hurry before Daddy died, but they just laughed.

By the time they finally decided to listen, their daddy was dead. Heart Attack. Sitting in his favorite chair on the front porch.

Blood Line

Liz unwrapped her smallest and favorite Christmas present. This gift, a diary, surprised her. It was supposed to be, "just a little present," meaning insignificant, yet she felt as if she met her new best friend. She hugged the pink palm-sized book with the shiny lock and key attached and waited for everyone to become distracted with holiday stuff then took it and hid it in the room she shared with her sister, Marie. Instinctively, she knew not to display too much interest in her diary because it would spark her mother and sister's curiosity, and they would read it and make fun of her, if they got bored.

She knew Anne Frank had named her diary-friend Kitty and began daydreaming what her own friend's name would be. Liz toyed with names. She couldn't just pick a name she liked. It had to fit. Thinking Sissy a fine choice, she tried to tell Dear Sissy about her day, but nothing came to her. The same thing happened when she tried Dear Becky and Dear Donna. All these names reminded her of someone else, real people, she couldn't bring herself to confide in since grandma Bert had taught her the difference between what you tell and what you don't. She'd explained it as being allowed to eat with your hands when no one is around, but when a guest comes you use your knife and fork. You put your best story forward.

Liz felt stupid calling her confidant Dear Diary, especially when she imagined Marie, finding her diary and singing throughout the house, Dear Diary, in a mocking manner. So she settled on D.

Finding time to tell D what she was really thinking, what made her mad or cry or laugh, proved difficult because she was rarely alone. At first, she would lift D from under her bed and take her in the bathroom for a chat, but her words felt heavy with inhibition. "What if," she feared, her journal was discovered, or worse, taken from her one night when the family watched TV while

she sat with D hidden in her lap, knees bent covertly toward the ceiling, trying to avoid lingering eyes.

Liz felt surveilled. She knew her words had power and she feared they could be used against her, so she wrote little niceties, about her mom, dad, grandma Bert, their dog Patches, Marie, or whatever she did that day, and only hinted at her true private thoughts. Eventually, these niceties barely resembled what she really thought or experienced. After awhile, the locked D began to collect dust under Liz's bed.

Occasionally, though, Liz would lift D from her hiding place and blow off the dust. With one hand she would hold her book flat against her budding chest and with the other she would reach into her nightstand, fingertips stretching, to find the key. She felt more secure in her thoughts knowing that the key rested where prying eyes could not see.

On one such occasion, Liz yearned to talk to D. She had gotten that squirmy feeling again. Since Liz thought D had helped her with this snaky problem once before, Liz hoped writing would help. She opened her journal and wrote, "D," thinking where she should begin. When that feeling got worse, she hugged D and her paperback Bible, keeping her eyes on heaven instead of herself, hoping she would no longer need to put her hands under her panties. She thought of Jesus and heaven. She sang, "Jesus Loves Me," under her breath, trying to drown out the call from down there. She refused to be transformed into the smooth nearly breastless snake-woman she often imagined herself when overcome with this feeling. She arched her back and squirmed. She twirled D's shiny key between her fingers and with her right hand squeezed her pencil tight, resting its tip in the corner of her mouth, teeth clenching its eraser.

"Hail Mary full of Grace. . . ."

When her throat became thick with blood and pressure, she rifled through her bible, praying and reading, scanning for magic words that would keep her here in this world. She took a drink of water. The words from the old catechism book she had found pounded in her ears: its a mortal sin when you know full well it's sinful and do it anyway.

Through all this tension Liz's sister Marie slept. She listened to Marie's breathing and the tick tick of her alarm clock. This night it had paused as if holding its breath when she wound it up for the night.

"Our father who art in Heaven. . ."

Distracting herself from the curvy feeling was almost too much for Liz. She tapped her fingers gently over the Sunday lettering of her days-of-the-week panties (27). She imagined herself filled with Church, its dizzying smell, incense and smoke. Liz closed her eyes. She opened them. They began to burn with the heaviness of sleep. She had exhausted herself. Her snake woman banished, she felt holy, thanked D, then drifted off, curled like a baby.

Liz kept D hidden while her aunt Dot's friend Carol stayed with them. Carol had a sob story: no money, no job, no place to live, and a husband she was hiding from. Mary agreed to help Carol, who slept in Liz's bed until things got better.

From her sleeping bag at night, Liz could see D resting underneath her bed where Carol sat and wrote. She closed her eyes and listened to Carol writing in a notebook. She could tell the paper was thin by the scratchy sounds her ballpoint pen made. Liz wished she could touch what she imagined were pages and pages of blue covered marks. She saw herself running her fingertips down each page, front and back, feeling words so plumped with feelings that the color leaked through to the other side.

Falling asleep each night to the sounds of silent words, Liz began to get more curious. She marveled at Carol's fearlessness. She had so much to say. She wondered if her mom, her aunts, or her grandma ever tried writing their stories down and came to regret asking her mom this question while they folded bath towels. Liz inhaled their warmth as she asked her mom if she ever wrote in a journal.

"Why do you ask?" Mary answered Liz.

"'Cuz, I just wondered how you or grandma Bert remember all those stories. I mean, your stories match."

"I don't know. I guess the parts we don't remember, we make up, no one ever complains."

"I wonder if Carol does?"

"What do you mean?"

Liz's faced flushed.

"Has Carol said something to you about us?"

"No. . .I. . .was—"

"You was what?"

Liz felt guilty as if she'd betrayed some unspoken confidence. She tried, "I don't know," but her mom knew better.

"You better tell me."

Liz told Mary about the blue soaked pages, but Mary didn't hear that part. She heard something about Carol writing pages and pages of stories about her, and she was going to find out what they were. She enlisted Liz as her accomplice. Liz stood watch outside her bedroom near the top of the stairs. As her mom read Carol's words, Liz's face burned. Her hands shook. And she jumped when her mom made loud exasperated sounds.

"Shouldn't Carol have known better than to leave her notebook unlocked after saying so many bad things?" Liz thought as she twisted and wrung her hands. She chewed her cheek and bit down hard when she heard her mother call her name.

"What is it?" Liz asked, tiptoeing in the bedroom.

"She thinks I'm a bitch."

"She said that?"

"Hhh," Mary breathed, exhaling through nose and mouth. "She thinks I'm a bitch *now*?. . . Just wait," she said, shaking her head back and forth, one side of her mouth pressing toward her ear. "And staying here for free."

"Mah um."

"What?"

"She'll hear you."

"I don't care if she hears me. She's sleeps in your bed, eats my food, uses 'bout a roll of toilet paper a day, all for free? And *I'm* a bitch."

"What can you do? You can't tell her you read her diary?"

"Why not? It's my house, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but..."

"Wanna know what she wrote about you?"

"She wrote. . .about me? Why?"

"Exactly, you sleep on this cold floor, and she has the gall to complain that you keep her awake farting all night?"

"I do not!"

"That's what she says."

"Nuh uh."

Liz read the passages that her mom pointed to. Carol complained about Liz keeping her awake at night with so many noises, in detail. She even wrote that she would rather sleep on the floor in the garage than have to sleep in the same room with the "stinky girl."

While reading about how much Carol despised her, Liz got more and more mad. "More like stupid girl," she thought as she nervously chewed on a pencil eraser.

Remembering how she shivered on the floor at night and how she gladly made Carol's bed caused the flush on Liz's face to change from embarrassed red to mad red. She eagerly marched down the stairs after Mary who rolled Carol's spiral notebook tighter and tighter between both of her hands.

Mary and Liz found Carol sitting on the loveseat in Bert's room. She was laughing. It was apparent that Carol admired Bert by the way she continually brought her ice-water and snacks and curled her hair and laughed hysterically at her jokes. Her journal proved her feelings sincere. She thought Bert's daughters unappreciative of their mother and hoped that Bert would one day love her more for treating her nicer. When Mary read this point, she regretted ever agreeing to let her sister's friend—not even her own friend—stay in her house.

Before Carol felt the sting of being swatted with her own notebook-turned-weapon, she heard it smack her arm.

"Want to explain how I've been so terrible to you?"

Carol was dazed by Mary's accusation. It took her a few seconds to recognize that it was her notebook that Mary hit her with and to remember what she had written that would have provoked her.

"You went through my things?"

"Yes I did."

"You don't have the right—"

"This is my house, isn't it?"

Feeling helpless, Carol looked at Bert. They'd spent so much time together recently, and she'd felt certain Bert would come to her rescue. Surely she would rage with embarrassment and indignation at Mary's behavior. With her mouth open, her nostrils flaring, Carol glared at Mary. She looked back at Bert, lowering the inner points of her eyebrows like an animated puppy, pleading without words. She knew she wouldn't have to tell Bert why what Mary had done was wrong. She even felt a strange tinge of pleasure, anticipating Bert's harsh words to Mary.

"Mary?" Bert looked at her daughter.

"Mom, she had the nerve to talk bad about me, call me a bitch, after I've been feeding her and doing her laundry."

"I was just defending you, Bert. I was mad that she had been so nasty to you, her own mother, what I wouldn't give..."

Bert interrupted, "You have no right to make judgments here.

"But. . .she. . ."

"She's my daughter. You're not."

"Please, Bert. . ."

"I don't think it's a good idea for you to stay here any more. Do you?

"But—"

"But nothin. Now, go in there and call Dot. Have her pick you up. Hear me? Hear me? Then take your notebook on upstairs and pack up."

"But—"

"Go on."

Mary put her arm around Liz's shoulders and pulled her close. Liz stood next to her mom who stood next to hers. This solidarity moved Liz's downcast eyes up in time to see Carol's notebook leave the room and feel the power of three generations drawing an invisible bloodline.

Standing tall with her mom and grandma, Liz felt big, included, but not proud.

That night, using her chewed up eraser, Liz tried to erase Snake Woman and other private parts from D's pages, but it didn't work. She pulled at the incriminating ones, but they couldn't be removed without evidence that they'd been there, so she locked her and kept her intact.

On Saturday afternoon, Mary played "Oh Heck" with Liz, Marie, and their friend Annie. When Liz won the card game, Marie tossed her cards on top of the stack then began shuffling them the way a sore loser might.

"Write this in your diary, Liz: 'I won once,'" Marie teased. "Someday you'll want to remember what it felt like."

Liz wanted to challenge her sister but, instead, tried to change the subject by asking if the winner gets to pick the next game.

"You still write in that diary?" Mary asked.

"Mom, ya know what happened? I locked it, then lost the key."

"You want me to get it open for you?" Mary laughed while Marie and Annie looked at each other.

"No. Come on, let's play another game," Liz answered nonchalantly.

"Come on. Go get it. I'll get it open."

"Mom."

"I want to see if you wrote anything about me in there."

"Mom."

"I'm not playin now. Go get it."

Liz made a defiant look.

"What? You got somethin in there you don't want me to see?"

"I just don't want you to break it open. Then I won't be able to lock it again. I really like that book."

"Go on. I can do it. You'll see."

"But—"

"Go!"

Liz's throat tightened. Her upper lip became moist. Her legs felt stiff as she climbed the steps to her bedroom. Marie and Annie's voices sounded eager. Although she couldn't make out what they were saying, she could tell by the sound of their laughter they were having fun.

"I thought you said you couldn't find the key."

"I know."

"You lied to your mama?"

Marie and Annie laughed at Mary's playful tone. Liz self-consciously laughed as if unconcerned, as if her life was an open book. Awaiting something good, Marie and Annie kneeled on their chairs, elbows supporting their faces, breathing shallow

"Hmm. . .Huh. . .," Mary said as she read to herself.

"What?" Liz, Marie, and Annie shouted in unison.

As a reflex Liz yelled, "jinx," glad to shut them up.

"Oh, yeah. I remember that," Mary said outloud, lost in nostalgia. "Remember that carnival we had in the backyard?"

"Yeah, those Baldwin kids," Annie giggled.

"They kept coming back with more money, trying to win money from the balloon bust? I remember," Marie said, nodding her head.

Then they all laughed, thinking good times.

"Here we go, this is good," Mary said.

When she cleared her throat, Snake Woman's shadow drifted past Liz's memories. She thought of her days-of-the week panties, wishing she were the kind of girl who wore them on the right day.

"My Mother," Mary read, waving for quiet. Then continued reading the poem she had written for Liz to turn in for her fifth grade poetry competition.

"*My Mother*

There's no one like my mother.

I wouldn't have any other.

Even as she's growing old,

Her wisdom is as good as gold.

When I'm sick, she's always there.

When I'm sad, she's aware

Of how it feels when thinks go wrong

Of love and laughter, right and wrong."

Mary, Liz, Marie, and Annie all cheered.

"That was a good poem," Mary said as she closed the journal.

And Liz nodded in agreement.

Blue Blockers

Bert looked everywhere for her sunglasses even though she was certain she had set them on the hutch after packing her daughters' lunches. Bitsy told her mom she had seen them on the hutch that morning. Dot, too, had seen them there by the bowl of peppermints. Mary denied ever having seen them. Bert had no more time. She was late for work.

When Bert got home that night, she lined up Bitsy, Dot, and Mary and told them she wanted her Foster Grants back. She knew one of them had done something with them. They all protested. Bert warned them they would all be punished if her glasses were not found. With that, each girl roamed around in search of Bert's amber-colored glasses. They picked up cushions and opened drawers and rummaged around. Mary, trying to look inconspicuous, hid them under her pillow because she did not want to get in trouble for having taken them. She touched the bruises on her arm from the last time she'd gotten in trouble, and she thought that maybe they could go away before she got any more.

That night she looked over at Dot sleeping next to her and tucked her hand under her pillow, feeling the glasses' soothing coolness. Mary must have slept soundly because she woke up just like that, her hand on her guilt. Hearing her mom downstairs, she knew she couldn't put them back on the hutch without getting caught. She hurried Dot out of their room by telling her she'd make their bed, hoping Dot would not see what sat under her pillow.

Downstairs, Bert held out each girl's lunchbox, one at a time. Before letting each lunch go, she stared intently at them, one at a time, asking each if she'd taken her sunglasses. After each denial, Bert warned that if her sunglasses were not back that night, they would all catch hell and would continue catching hell until either her glasses showed up or someone confessed. There was no way Mary was going to confess.

Mary strategized. She told Dot she knew it was Bitsy, and Dot agreed. After school, she and Dot snuck into Bitsy's room to find them. When they got bored, Dot went downstairs without Mary to spy on Bitsy, so left alone, Mary tucked the glasses in her shirt in the place where her mom tucked her secret money, bending over to hold them there. Seeing Dot coming back up the steps, Mary hunched over like she had a cramp and hurried to the bathroom, which made Dot think Mary was going to be sick. While looking at herself in the mirror, Mary let out a couple low fake moans. This trick worked because Dot made mock-Mary sounds outside the bathroom door then went outside.

Though Mary had to lean her head way back to hold the glasses on her face, she still could see. Everything looked different, brighter, prettier. The piece of dust that hung in the corner of the ceiling looked cute, like a stuffed animal. This new world seemed filled with wonder. She stood on the toilet and looked out the window. The sky looked the way it should. The cars driving by seemed happy. Everything had a rosy tint. She was elated. She wished she had her own pair of sunglasses like her mother's. Mary wondered if her older sister Bitsy might someday take her to Woolworth and buy her a pair. She imagined Bitsy seeing her wearing the glasses, not being mad, but telling her that she looked so smart that she'd take a whipping for her. With that thought, Mary took one last look at herself, removed the pretty glasses, and tiptoed back to her room, trying to avoid the creaky board. She felt satisfied. She knew neither Bitsy nor Dot would take her punishment, and she was really going to get it this time, yet she didn't care.

Just like she didn't care when she told Sister Mary Catherine that her mom, Bert, couldn't come to parent's night because Bert had cut her thumb off cutting chicken up to fry. Mary didn't plan to say that—it just came out. She also didn't plan to tell Sister Mary Catherine that her mom didn't even cry when she had wrapped up her own thumb in wax paper and aluminum foil for the doctors to sew back on. In her story, Mary had helped her mom, who asked her to act as an extra hand by holding the chicken thigh while Bert cut off the leg section. Mary told Sister that she felt like she knew what the poor souls in hell must feel like, seeing all that blood. She actually shivered as she told Sister how the blood from her mom's hand kept leaking through the wax paper, but never got on any of the chicken. Sister Mary Catherine hugged her. She couldn't look

directly at her as Mary continued to tell her how her mom had made her rubberband another piece of wax paper on to her cut off thumb, which she did even though she was afraid, to help her mother.

Sister held Mary's face to her belly, tight, and asked her if her mom was okay now. Mary lifted her face up to the red-faced Sister and nodded yes, then continued on with something about how her mom was so mad at the doctors and how she had made fun of them because they couldn't sew her thumb back on, "What good is all that education if you can't even sew a hard-working mother's thumb back on?" At that moment, Mary felt the kind of happiness that you don't know you are feeling until it's gone. Sister Mary Catherine pulled Mary's arms from around her waist, tidied Mary's hair, and said she was glad Mary had told her about her mom's accident, but that Sister needed to finish her playground duties. Sister was not mad. In fact, Mary thought that Sister's sympathy tears sounded like laughter, which is why she was so surprised when her mom came home and hit her with what was "cut off."

Expecting to find her glasses back on the hutch, Bert was agitated when she came home and saw that they had not miraculously appeared, so she made Bitsy, Dot, and Mary stand in front of her. She asked where her Foster Grants were. As they did not move and did not speak, Bert grabbed the hairbrush sitting nearby and cracked Bitsy on her arm. Then she did the same to Dot and Mary. She told them that they were to stand there until someone admitted taking her glasses. About an hour later Mary said she had to go to the bathroom and Bert told her she should have thought of that before she took her sunglasses. Not wanting to get another whipping for lying, Mary crossed her legs and put her hands between them. Shortly after, Bert told Bitsy to set the table and Dot and Mary to wash their hands and faces. They all ate green beans and ham in silence while Mary and Dot glared at Bitsy who had snuck a romance novel on her lap and sat reading while Mary and Dot were suffering.

The next day was a duplicate of the last, but the following day when Mary and Dot got home from school, Bitsy greeted them with the lost glasses. Because Dot knew she hadn't taken them, she stood next to Bitsy, who shoved Mary. Mary was now sorry she had not owned up right away. Finding the miracle waiting on the hutch, Bert knew it must have been Mary because Bitsy

and Dot stood there with their hands on their hips. Bert called for Mary. Mary did not come from the first call, but knew better to let her mother yell twice. She entered the room thinking about how she would explain her actions. But that was unnecessary because Bert did not give her the chance to explain why she took them in the first place and why she didn't own up to taking them right away and why after a couple of days she was afraid to come clean because her mom had already grabbed the first thing her hand had touched, which was a milk bottle, and all hell did break loose.

Mary imagined she watched hell breaking lose from some place outside herself. She pretended she watched the scene from above and was surprised that hell was so white, like snow. She couldn't hear what her mom was saying over the buzzing in her ears. Did she imagine the wet clonking sounds the bottle made on her arms and her legs? She watched the milk bottle in slow amazement. It bled. It's sticky goodness splattered on her skin, on her thighs. She watched her mouth shape itself into an O. That night, she looked at her naked body and thought of roses. The sour smell of baby puke stuck in her nose. She tried, but could not cry.

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Mary was running late for work. Her sunglasses weren't sitting behind the sun visor of her car even though that's where she'd kept them since she began driving. When she found them in her purse and touched their cool metallic frames, she got that glossy feeling. She remembered the world she saw through her mom's rose-colored lenses. She remembered that little version of herself. She drove to work thinking about that day her mom reached for the milk bottle, how mad her mom was at her for letting her sisters get whipped when it was her fault. She saw little Mary holding those big Foster Grants on her head. She saw how she had to hold her head up high in order to hold them on her face. She smiled at the girl she used to be. Mary remembered why she took those glasses and hid them. She had just wanted to look at herself in the mirror wearing what her mom loved while pretending to smoke in the way she did—slow and fearless and
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without flicking an ash. She could still remember how much happier and safe things looked through those old frames, how steady her hands.

When she got home from work that night, Mary saw that her oldest daughter, Liz, had tried to surprise her by making a dinner of grilled cheese and tomato soup. This did not surprise Mary because Liz was always doing stuff like that. Opening a Coke, Mary called her sister Dot. She was a little surprised Dot answered because it was Friday night when Dot usually went to a Parents-Without-Partners dance.

While Mary ate and talked, Liz sat across the table and watched. Mary waved her pack of Viceroys, gesturing to Liz that she needed a match. Liz looked like an eager puppy, sitting, fetching, hungry for her evening good-girl pat.

Familiar with this scene, Liz's sister Marie decided to take advantage of the opportunity. She would sneak a smoke for herself. She took a pack of cigarettes from the closet and hid them in her pants, the pack of matches from the drawer rested in the palm of her right hand as she descended straight-backed down the steps. She cupped the matches covertly in her palm until inside the bathroom. Then she turned the light on and latched the door. Marie stood and looked at herself in the smoky old mirror that hung on the inside of the locked bathroom door. She tapped the pack the way her mother did then she pulled the plastic wrapper off the cigarette pack. She held her dad's hairbrush to her ear as if it were a telephone and placed a cigarette between her teeth. She waved her hand, miming her mother's silent request for a match, then she cradled the brush between her shoulder and chin and lit her cigarette, blowing her match out with the smoke she'd inhaled.

"What's your sister doing," Mary asked Liz, once off the phone. Without waiting for an answer, she called for her missing daughter.

At the sound of her name, Marie jumped and coughed. She flicked her cigarette the way her dad would do when he was outside. In her nervousness, she overthrew the toilet and hit the plastic shower curtain, leaving a melty brown spot. Hearing irritation in her mother's continued call

for her, Marie waved the smoke around with both arms and tossed the cigarette and pack of matches in the toilet.

"Coming," she yelled, running up the steps.

That Saturday, when Daryll went down for his morning newspaper read, he discovered the cigarette butts and whole pack of matches in the toilet. It would be awhile before he noticed the shower curtain. Hearing his shouts of "for crying out loud" and "son-of-a-gun," Marie made a dash for her bedroom. But Daryll had already traveled up the stairs and caught Marie by her hair. She shook her head in confusion.

"It wasn't me, Daddy."

"Who then?"

Marie simply shook her head and cried.

"It was either you or Liz. Are you saying it was Liz?"

"Not me," Marie managed to choke out.

"If I find out you lied to me, I'll knock your head off. Ya hear me?"

"Uh huh."

Daryll poured himself some Kool-Aid while Marie stood, scared to move.

"Don't you have some work to do?"

Marie took that as her cue to run and hide in the front of the house where Mary came in from getting the mail. When she asked Marie what her dad was screaming about, Marie confessed everything. She cried big tears in quiet.

"Please Mommy, I can't tell him I did it now."

"Well, why'd you lie then?"

"I don't know. I. . .I didn't mean to"

"I guess you'll just have to own up to it."

"I can't."

"What choice do you have?"

"Maybe he'll forget?" Marie asked looking at the ground.

"Can't Liz say she did it?" Marie pleaded. Mistaking a noise from the TV as her dad climbing the stairs, she felt a buzz of fear and the warm dampness of pea streaming down her legs.

"Aw God. Clean that up, pee-pot. Go upstairs now and change your clothes."

Liz met her sister at the top of the steps.

"What happened?"

Marie just stood there.

"What did you do?"

"I left cigarette butts in the toilet and Daddy found them."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing, I told him I didn't do it."

"Marie! He knows you did. Who else but me could have done it?"

Marie pushed past her sister and started taking off her wet pants.

"Your not planning on leaving them there are you?"

"Liz, can't you say you did it?"

"What? No. I'm not taking any more of your beatings. Besides how stupid can you get?"

"Please."

Marie and Liz grabbed each other's arms when they heard the door open and the psh psh sound of bare feet climbing the stairs. They stood still. They quit holding their breaths when the sound matched their mother's. Liz looked up at her mother while Marie looked at her wet pants on the floor.

"You'll tell him you did it?" Mary asked Liz.

"Bu. . .," Liz started to say that it wasn't fair, but she looked into her mother's eyes. Seeing her saintly reflection in them, she, instead, nodded that she would.

"Are you sure?"

Liz nodded

Mary smiled and patted Liz on her head, licking a stray hair down.

"Marie's lucky to have a sister like you."

Liz nodded.

That night Mary and Marie went to Kmart to buy something to make Liz feel better. In the morning, Liz found her very own pair of amber colored sunglasses. She put them on and looked around her deserted room. She held her hands up in front of her eyes and put them together playing here is the church and here is the steeple. She looked down at her sore legs. She wondered at the beauty of rose coloring. It brightened bruised stripes, turning shades of shame to colors from the heart.

Martyr

Father Marty was a priest, just not the Roman kind. He had a wife, grown kids, and was missing a foot. When the doctor amputated it, Father Marty became angry when the surgeon insisted on anesthesia because he wanted to numb the pain himself, through self-hypnosis. That's how Liz met him. He practiced professional hypnosis and specialized in past-life regressions. She heard about him through some new-age thing and made an appointment when she found his card on the bulletin board of her favorite coffee house. She didn't go to him because it sounded kind of cool or different. She went because she had been crying for weeks: in her car, in her closet, in bathroom stalls, while watching TV, while doing dishes, while brushing her teeth. Although she managed to hide this affliction from her boss, her husband, her family, and her friends, she was still in pain. It wasn't that pain you get in the center of your chest when your heart is broken, but a tightening in her throat. She felt as if she were strangling by being constantly choked up.

Liz tried not to listen to the session Father Marty was having with another "patient," but trying to wait and not listen only made her appear crazy, like a junky, so she walked around the outer office trying to find a bathroom. She thought about leaving, but before she could, Father Marty came out with a woman who looked like Kathy Bates, and told Liz he'd be right with her. After a goodbye hug, the woman left, and he invited Liz into his private office. Liz had a knack for being hypnotized. But the regression part took a great deal more imagination.

When Father Marty asked her to go back to an earlier time when she was a child, she kind of remembered something, a vision that played a little out of focus at first, then became more and more clear. It wasn't waking up to screaming that stood out in that memory, nor was it the sound of dishes breaking, bottles crashing onto the floor. She wouldn't have said that it was the

sound of her own heart drumming, like someone else's, that took her back to that moment as much as remembering "now clean it up." Had her cheeks burnt with fear? Had she actually heard tiny muffled grunts from the next room? Liz wasn't sure if her mom knelt down, knees in glass, snot drooling from her nose and mouth, nor was she certain what had inspired her five-year-old feet to leave her bed, or what her ten small fingers, her ten smaller toes could have done to save her mother from those shards of glass. She wasn't afraid, though her help was flung across that kitchen floor along with his words "leave her clean it up." She remembered how determined she was. She outwaited her father. Knowing his sounds, she waited for his breath to come from his bed. Standing there she could see those empty cabinets, how beautiful the slivers of glass looked beneath the river of Sloe Gin that mingled with her mother's blood—that simple linoleum floor transformed into a mosaic of broken pledges and plates. She remembered that it didn't matter if she'd gotten cut. It didn't matter that her mom had told her to go to bed. What mattered was that she had not.

And then she was born. Not into this world but into the flames that ignited her flesh. At first, like in a dream, she tried to scream but could not because the leather strap that held her head erect squeezed and burnt her throat. She wanted to look down and see her burning flesh, to lift her bound arms and float into the heavens, open armed and as a ray of the hottest blue light. The air was heavy, and she found it hard to breathe until Father Marty's voice rescued her from the eyes. The eyes that burnt her flesh worse than the flames. His voice told her that her arms were no longer bound and that her neck was no longer strapped and that she could say anything that she wanted. He told her she was free.

Dream Wall

Thy slain are not slain with the sword, nor dead in battle.
Isaiah 22.2

Liz had the sensation of waking even though she slept. "Awake," she found herself on a pilgrimage, entering a kind of war memorial for women whose lives were lost in the ritual practice of martyrdom. She stood along with her mother, her aunts, and other faceless family members in front of a concrete wall that was their destination. Liz observed the wall as her mother and her aunts, in a prayer-like tone, repeated their own names and the particular dates carved in stone beneath them. She was surprised at the size of this structure. No beginning nor ending point could be seen as it curved through pregnant clouds and mountains—a tombstone-like fence extending indefinitely in both directions. The starkness of the place was amplified by a paradoxical sense of isolation formed from simultaneous repetition of individual chants. These off-beat prayers bounced off the concrete wall, creating a drum-like echo Liz felt reverberating in her throat. She could not stand still, feeling as if movement would prevent her from choking.

Along the bricked path adjacent to the wall, Liz walked and noticed each woman interacting with her stone space as if imprisoned within an invisible temple. She peered in finding many busy scrubbing and polishing or worshiping their own uncanny symbols. She couldn't remember seeing her mother with any objects, so she turned around, curious to discover what her mother attended to. Her mother's space seemed an empty tomb, an inconsolable void. Liz found her own memorial next to her mother's. In it sat a blood-red journal. When she picked it up, she felt her own pulse vibrate through it, a bloodline connection. Then she wanted to chant the name and date engraved on her individual stone along with the others but could not because neither were legible. It looked as though it had once been clear but had worn away with time.

Without a name or a date, she had no prayer and began to panic. Between the dream and waking worlds, she asked her mom and aunts, "What does it mean?" At first, she calmly repeated her question, but woke up shouting because neither her mother nor her aunts could respond as they were lost in their own chants.

Love Stain

Liz and Marie said their prayers then kissed their mom goodnight. As usual Liz held her sister's hand while watching her eyelids begin their descent. Often she would listen for the changing rhythms of Marie's breath, trying to breathe in and out to the same beat. This was difficult, but, at times, their breaths moved in unison. She always tried to guess the exact moment when Marie fell asleep then imagined where her dreams took her.

In the morning, Liz brushed her teeth fast, scratching her gums because she knew they were going to be late for school, again. Walking as fast as they could and holding hands as they usually did, Liz gripped tight. She knew that she was the oldest and should not be afraid, yet the tears came out anyway.

"Liz, we aren't that late."

"I know but Mrs. Nelson said if I'm late, she'll. . ."

"But it's not your fault."

"It doesn't matter."

Tasting the salt of her runny nose, Liz wished she could be more like her younger sister. The tears on Liz's face had changed to icicles, making it hard to talk, so they walked without speaking and helped each other up when the other had fallen.

The burning-cold morning air contrasted with the sky's dim quality and the eerie sound of no cars passing. The whole city slept as Liz and Marie made their way to school. They passed the short cut, but kept walking because they weren't allowed to take it. It wasn't safe.

Having almost made their way to school, Liz and Marie stood at the top of White Street and looked down at their school in quiet awe. The street had a dangerously steep grade, they knew because they'd seen many old cars without enough power to drive up it. From where they stood, Central Fairmount looked like a mansion in a scary movie. The snow had piled up on the

window ledges, and from the windows that had been broken, the ice did not reflect light but absorbed it into those replacement panes of hard blue plastic. Liz took the first step then let go of Marie's hand because she went down on the snow-covered ice and didn't want to pull Marie down, too.

With snow up their backs, Liz and Marie finally made it to the main entrance door. Liz thought they must be really late because no one was outside. Liz had never noticed how big these doors were, and when she tried to push the handle, she realized they were chained. They must be really late if the doors were locked.

"Let's go in the other door," Marie suggested and Liz nodded in agreement.

When they found the other door open, Liz began to panic. She knew Mrs. Nelson would yell at her in front of everybody.

"Liz, do you want me to walk with you to your class?"

"But then you'll have to go to your class by yourself, and I'm the oldest."

"I don't care."

Both girls kicked the snow off their shoes and tried not to slip on the tiled floor. On the way to Liz's class, a custodian yelled,

"Hey, what are you two doing?"

Softly Liz told him that they were late, again.

"What, speak up."

"We are going to our classes."

"Don't you know? Don't you know that school is closed today?"

Liz and Marie looked at each other. *Snow day.*

That spring, Liz waited for Marie at their usual spot after school. When she didn't walk out with her friends, Liz asked each one of Marie's friends where Marie was, and each one sang the same song,

"Wham, waa, shhh."

"What does that mean?" They each answered her question by repeating "wham, waa, shhh." Their laughter infectious.

When Marie finally came out of school, the singing and laughing continued.

Marie's hands were clammy.

"What's the matter?"

"Let's go home."

"Wham, waa, shhhh!"

Marie squeezed Liz's hand in a way that she usually did not, so they left quickly. When they were almost half way home, Liz told Marie that she knew something had happened.

"Tell me what it is."

"I got a swat."

"What? Why?"

"Mrs. Snyder said I stole money."

"What money?"

"The $2.69 that was missing from her purse."

"That's stupid. You don't have any money."

Marie didn't say anything. Her lips pressed together. She squeezed Liz's hand made slippery from their sweat.

"Well, why did she think you took it?

"Because I had found that same amount under that big tree there and was going to buy some candy for us after school."

"How, we aren't allowed in the store?"

"Don't tell."

"Tell me what happened."

"She told me that if I didn't admit to taking her money that I would get a swat."

"Wait. I get *wham.* That's the swat. *Waa*, that's you crying. Right? What's the *shh* part?

"Mrs. Snyder made me stand up on the table in front of class. When I told her I didn't take her money, she gave me a swat. . .I wet my pants."

When they got home, Mary could tell something was up. She knew Liz would tell her, so she threatened her with a whipping.

Mary became furious when she realized that Mrs. Snyder touched *her* daughter. She immediately called the principal who was both surprised and apologetic and tried to get Mary to calm down. The next day Mrs. Snyder told Marie she was sorry and let Marie pick the story for the day.

Marie and Liz had fun, walking home from school. Like when they'd find a dead bird, Liz would get Marie to pick it up, and they would bury it. Or when Liz really wanted to impress her friends she'd show-off by getting Marie to eat dirt. *See, she likes it.* She felt proud that her sister could do what theirs could not. But other times it was not fun.

Marie often practiced her name-calling skills on their way home from school. She wasn't that good at it yet, not knowing any swear words, so she'd compensate for this weakness by screaming as loud as she could. Once she yelled at the group of kids across the street. When she got their attention, she spewed at them how stupid they were and ugly and, for her grand finale, she told them they were nothing but fat swine.

Kids don't like to be called swine. To defend themselves against Marie's attack, they started throwing rocks. One hit Liz in the head, which started to bleed, so they ran. Unable to clean up the blood on her own, Liz had to tell her mom that some kids were throwing rocks at them. Demanding to know which kids, Mary got it out of Liz that it was the new kids that moved into the house where Mary's friend use to live.

"Are you sure, you didn't do anything to them."

Liz, feeling as if she really hadn't, told her mom that she didn't do anything.

"Then let's go."

"What? No."

"Yes. Now. Their mother can deal with this."

"But. . ."

"Now!"

Mary was not only disappointed but embarrassed after discovering the instigators were her girls, and she made sure both of them would not to do that to her again. She decided to let their father handle it.

That night Daryll was mostly mad at Liz for not defending Marie. He couldn't understand why they ran away and had not thrown any rocks back at those punks.

"You have to learn to stand up for yourself and for your sister."

"I know, daddy. But. . ."

"They could have hit your sister and you let them. You're the oldest. You have to stick-up for her.

"But—"

"It don't matter whose fault. Here me?"

"Yeah."

"If I ever find out didn't stand up, I'll make sure you wished you had. Got it?"

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Liz and Marie wanted to take the short cut through the woods even though they knew if they got caught they would get in a lot of trouble. Liz walked, holding her library books in her arms the way the big kids did and enjoying the damp scent of spring. Marie was bored and mad that Liz was ignoring her. When she spied some big kids drinking and smoking, she screamed that she was going to tell, no, she was going to call the police. This comment provoked words and bottles to be flung in Marie's direction.

Liz, feeling the call to protect her little sister, pushed Marie behind her and screamed, "Leave her alone. If you have to pick on somebody, pick on me."

Between the time her eyes blinked closed, that quick, those boys stood in front of Liz. They yanked the books from her hand and tossed them in a pile of jagged rocks. *My books.* Liz couldn't speak or hear anything but a loud buzz inside her head. She didn't feel the rocks hit her knee or her elbow, but she felt the rip in the books' binding. She grabbed them and ran, slipping in the mud. Marie waited for her at the end of the path.
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"Run" Marie screamed.

The rain and recently melted snow had made the path to the street a slope of brown mud and glass. Trying to climb up and out onto the sidewalk, gripping her books with her left hand, Liz slipped, slicing her wrist open. Trying to keep the blood off of her fake-fur coat, because she loved that coat and because her mom would discover that they were in the woods and give her the promised whipping, Liz decided to go into the forbidden corner store and ask for help. There, the clerk said he didn't have any bandages. Liz said she was sorry for messing up his floor.

When blood began pouring from her wrist, Liz knew she was in big trouble. So she gave her books to Marie and told her to wait there. Liz held her breath and walked into the dark saloon on the opposite corner. The bartender wanted to call Liz's mom, but Liz begged him not to. He pulled the bits of glass from her wrist and tried to rinse the blood from her coat. Liz was surprised by how much blood had poured out of such a small cut. The bartender offered Liz a coke, but she said she wasn't allowed. He bandaged it tight and made her hold her arm up in the air. He said he was sorry that that was the best he could do. When Liz looked at her wrist, she wished she hadn't walked through the woods. She knew her coat would never be the same. The blood would never come out.

Crooked Arrow

Behind Liz's little girl eyes sleep swam in its dizzying way. She looked at the clock and wished her dad would wake up. He said if he's late one more time he could get fired, so why would he keep telling her "five more minutes?" Since it was too early to turn the TV on, she just worked ahead in her speller. Her heart pumped heavy worrying what would happen if he did get fired and worrying about making him mad. Bert, Liz's grandma, woke up and went to the bathroom. After making herself ice water, she patted Liz on the back and went back to bed. Liz heard her dad get up and looked at the clock. It was too late for her to go back to sleep, so she kept working on the next week's spelling lesson.

That morning her sister Marie did not get up in enough time to brush her hair or her teeth and stormed after Liz when Liz told her she couldn't wait for her any more or they'd both be late for school. This infuriated Marie, who was still half asleep and couldn't catch up to Liz though she wasn't so far behind that Liz couldn't hear her screaming, "You bitch, You bitch," over and over. When Liz turned around to get her to be quiet, she fell to her knees laughing at the sight: one side of Marie's hair was plastered flat except for one wild hunk that stuck straight out over her ear, and all the hair on the other side of her head stood straight up. She didn't walk but stomped, pumping elbows and spewing profanities. Liz ran back towards Marie.

"What is the matter?"

"You bitch."

"Marie, stop screaming that. Everyone can hear you."

"Well, why didn't you wait for me?"

"I just don't want to be late. Cmon. Here, give me your bag and fix your pants, they're crooked."

Marie was cantankerous. She hated Miss Goody-two-shoes. "Grandma, can I get you more water; I'll rub your feet, Mom; I'll wake you up, Daddy." Yesterday she heard her Grandma

tell Liz that she was her favorite. "What's so great about little Miss Perfect?" These were Marie's thoughts sitting in the cafeteria when she saw Liz walking towards her, wearing the antique ribbons Grandma gave her for being so good natured.

"Marie, I forgot my lunch. Will you give me half your sandwich?"

"No, I want it."

"But, I'm really hungry."

"Too bad," Marie said as she took a big bite. "It's *really* good. Mmmm."

"What about last week Wednesday, Thursday, *and* Friday when you forgot yours?"

"Too bad."

"Give me half of it. You'll still have the rest of your lunch."

Marie turned her back to Liz.

Liz grabbed Marie's shoulders and tried to turn her back around.

"What're you going to do about it?" Marie teased Liz slowly putting her sandwich in her mouth.

Liz's hand now functioned without her authority. When Marie's teeth prevented the sandwich from being shoved down her throat, Liz's hand smeared the mayonnaise-laden bread all over Marie' face.

"Fight, fight, fight," cried the first to witness the face smearing. The room looked to Liz the veiled color of shame, so she dropped her head and ran to the bathroom where she spent the rest of her lunch period.

Hiding in the bathroom stall, Liz swore she wouldn't share another thing with Marie. When the bell rang, Liz took a deep breath, happy she hadn't been called to the office.

The next day, Marie and two of her friends stood next to Liz in the cafeteria. They were all laughing in the inside joke kind of way.

"You're not going to believe this," Marie said to Liz with a smirk while giving her friend the elbow code.

"What, what's so funny?," Liz asked confused.

"I lost my lunch."

"You can't be serious?"

"Please, I'll never ask you again. How'd you like me to smear mayonnaise all over your face? You owe me."

"Here just take it."

Marie's friend elbowed the other.

"Thanks, you're the best, big sister."

When they got far enough that Liz couldn't hear, Marie's friend asked how long she'd fall for it.

"Forever," Marie said. And they all laughed.

That afternoon Mrs. Shackman raffled off twelve books to the students who had earned one hundred percent on their spelling tests two weeks in a row. Tony Rolisan wanted a Hardy Boys book but won, instead, *Little Women*. No one would volunteer to exchange books with Tony, who wasn't that good of a reader, so Mrs. Shackman assured Tony and the class that Liz would do it.

"Won't you Liz?"

"Do I have to?"

"No. But I think you'll like *Little Women* better than *The Sign of the Crooked Arrow*."

"Please Liz," Tony smiled, which didn't help his case.

"But I don't have to?"

"No, it's up to you, but I know you'll want to help Tony. He doesn't get his name in the hat very often like you do."

Liz's best friend Mia, who hated all the boys, especially the "stupid ones" kept whispering "don't do it, don't do it."

Liz looked at Tony and Mrs. Shackman who stared back with expectant eyes.

"If I don't have to, I'll keep *The Sign of the Crooked Arrow*.

Liz smiled at Mia. Mia rolled her eyes and told her she wouldn't be reading that stupid Hardy Boys book. Then Liz looked down at her desk and the cover of her new book. The boy riding the horse on the cover became in her imagination, Tony. She imagined Tony's red hair turned as golden as that boy holding the reigns with one hand while pointing toward the sky with the other. "This book belonged to him," she thought.

The next day she gave the book to Tony.

"Are you sure? I gave *Little Women* to my sister, so I can't trade," Tony politely told Liz.

"Yeah, it's yours. Really."

Fish Pond

Mary wanted to go to Sunlight Pool to swim in the world's largest pool, but she didn't have quite enough money for admission *and* hotdogs. When she saw the Muscular Dystrophy ad encouraging kids to raise money for a great cause by hosting a summer carnival, her plan was concocted. They would hold their own summer carnival—their daytrip, the cause.

They planned the carnival for two weeks. Mary set the budget at five dollars. Liz and her friend Annie bought toy soldiers and penny candy for the fish-pond prizes. They arranged their makeshift booths, knocked on the doors of neighborhood kids, made Kool-Aid and filled baggies with potato chips. What was the most fun and made the most money was the Balloon Bust. For this booth, Mary, Liz, Marie, and Annie cut up pieces of paper that they marked with five cents, ten cents, twenty five cents, and a few with one dollar that they stuffed into balloons to be attached to an old piece of paneling. They found the darts in the garage.

The booth brought out the gambler in the kids of the neighborhood who had been longing for a big game. When they would run out of money, Mary would remind them that only one of the dollar balloons had been busted. The itch to win inspired older brother to rob younger brother's piggy, according to older brother a fair swap for letting him tag along. Mary let another boy call his babysitter, who was happy to loan him a couple of dollars for a few hours of alone time with her boyfriend. Whenever someone would leave, they would come back with friends. The Send-Us-To-Coney Island cause created a buzz of illicit neighborhood fun for kids of all ages and a diversion for Mary.

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At the world's largest pool, the sun shone. Mary was happy and did flips and underwater handstands. Liz and Marie and Annie competed for straightest-legs and most-flips-in-a-row while Mary floated and dozed on her $1.99 raft and dreamt ocean dreams. The sun reflecting off the
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water changed the darkness Mary normally saw beneath closed eyelids to a bright red color. Perhaps the bright light, the floating, the rocking, and the juxtaposition of her body's water-cooled underside with her burning back affected her sun dreams. In this state, she soared above the pool as a queen, locked in the body of a powerful raptor. As an osprey, Mary's vision was keen. She could see far beneath the water's surface. The water changed no longer reflecting the artificial blue of the swimming pool, but a natural murkiness, from the earth and the life held within it.

A screaming child pulled Mary back. She opened her eyes and saw that both Liz and Marie were playing safely. Mary tried to go back into the same dreaming place. She squinted her eyes trying to remember what it was that felt good to her. In the few seconds it took her to remember flying, as an Osprey, above a body of water, the moment had passed. She thought the bratty kid nearby screeched like her mother's parrot. She hated that bird, especially when her mother let it out of its cage. Although her mother loved her bird, she always said if she gets a choice, in another life, she wouldn't choose to be a caged anything. What she wished for was to be a dog. "That's the life," she would say.

Eventually, Mary drifted back into her bird shape doing mother activities. She floated in the air, circling the pool, looking for her two oldest daughters. When she couldn't find them, she woke up, feeling sick and hot. She rolled off her raft, cooling her entire body. When she stood, she saw Marie and her friend, Annie, but no Liz. Her eyes darted back and forth. She scanned for shapes beneath the water.

Panic made her dizzy. Anger made her scream. She screamed Liz's name. Each time, she got louder. When Liz tapped her mother on the back, Mary turned around so fast that Liz took a fearful breath. She grabbed Liz's shoulders, trying not to shake her.

"Where were you?"

"I had to go to the bathroom."

"Why didn't you answer?"

"I did, but you didn't hear."

The crooked looks from the other mothers intensified Mary's burning skin.

"Let's get a hot dog," Mary said and surprised them each with their own chips and coke. When they finished, they got ice-creams with sprinkles, laughing and wondering if they should have another carnival.

In the locker room, Chantell was the first to notice the zebra-like stripes marking Liz's legs. She nudged one friend then tapped another, pointing at Liz. Liz was used to their contemptuous glares, their ridicule, and did not think Chantell or her friends expected her to interact with them. She felt Chantell and the others thought of her as a ridiculous white girl who looked stupid in her $2.00 K-mart shoes, so Liz continued to pretend as if she didn't notice them. It surprised Liz when Chantell and the others came over to her, encircling her. Chantell's fingers pointed her question toward Liz's bruised legs. Liz knew they were not concerned for her. She also knew that a fall down the steps was code for abuse, but what else could she say, except, *it's nothing*?

At that moment, she wished Chantell was her friend. She imagined Chantell hugging her like a sister, telling her not to worry and even making Liz laugh with a joke. Liz imagined telling Chantell about her arm, too. Liz wished her skin was dark like Chantell's, dark skin to hide bruises beneath.

Chantell did not hug Liz, and she was not happy with Liz's *nothing* story. She told Liz if she didn't tell her the truth she would report what she saw to Ms. Jeeters, their gym teacher. Liz sat and said nothing.

Because Liz felt mostly invisible, she'd thought no one would notice or at least no one would care about the marks on her legs. She knew that Chantell and the others would soon forget about her. But she also knew she could not leave her legs bare or she'd risk drawing attention to herself and risk Ms. Jeeters alerting others who would ask her questions that she couldn't answer truthfully without feeling ashamed. Their inevitable downward looks and comments about her family would make her defensive and angry. She worried what would happen to her dad, too, so she took off her uniform, put her clothes back on, climbed the steps to the gym, and took an "F" for not dressing.

On the bleachers, Liz sat and thought. She put her fingertips in the scabbed-over path on her arm that had formed after she had gouged her own skin with her fingernails, a trail of frustration she'd created. Her scabs were shaped like bumpy mud-covered tracks. As she ran her finger along its ridges, she sensed that this was a road never to be followed. How could she have found such relief from scratching what did not itch? She didn't understand, yet the comfort it brought her was irresistible, so she dug and dug and dug, gouging her skin, until the volcano of noise around her only spitted smoke. She had tried to hide these marks that had mapped her frustration, but her mother saw and knew and told her dad, who told her to go upstairs and wait.

She was scared, but still had hope that maybe her dad wanted to talk to her, to understand why she would do such a thing. She could not have known that he had felt the urge to use his fists all day. The veins inside them had pulsed with energy, impatient to be noticed. Like an intense itch hidden inside a casted hand, this urge could not be calmed in any other way but one. Daryll no longer felt helpless but filled with the anticipation of relief. He told Liz to wait, so he could blow his nose, re-tie his shoes, and remove his belt—his standard ritual for street fights. Now the belt in his hand felt good, and he held onto it as he ascended the stairs.

Liz heard his footsteps, they were slow, not the sound of an angry man, but of a thinking man. Sitting on her bed, the way she'd been taught to sit in church, was not a convenient way to be taught a lesson, so Daryll picked her up with his left hand, throwing her face into the mattress. She turned her head to see his face and the loop of the belt. With each blow, he tried to generate more force, grunting and swinging the leather strap higher.

Liz felt something change. She no longer feared the whipping because she could no longer feel the strike. She felt herself slipping away. She tried to get away, but it only made her body bounce on the bed like a punching bag. She could tell her dad, lost in his own breathlessness, no longer knew what he was doing. She was afraid. Afraid *for* him. What if he killed her? She needed to get him to stop, but he would not have stopped except Mary decided that that was enough. She convinced Daryll of this, and he threw down the belt. She reached her arms out to Liz, but Liz could no longer tell the difference between love and punishment, so she hid behind the bed. Her eyes acutely aware of her mom's movements, ready to run, ready to live.

The next morning, Liz got up and was surprised that the knots on her legs and arms had not immediately turned black. That deep, dark, blue color took time to rise to the surface and an even longer time to fade.

Ordinary Night

A drunk girl came out of the bathroom stall and spoke to her friends, who laughed when she half sat, half fell to the moist floor. She may have said she needed a minute, but her tongue, inexperienced, refused to listen. Her fly eyes stared off to some upside down world as Liz washed and waited for her mom to finish. The two friends lost it when the girl slid down the wall, her skirt tucked into her underwear. Rear-end exposed, her face came to rest on one square of tissue. Laughing, both of her friends squeezed each other, tears from their laughter mingled with mascara while Liz looked the other way—until her mom came out and saw what they did not. Mary asked the girl if she could walk, got her to the sink where she rinsed her face and fixed her skirt. One of her friends left and came back with a cup of water and a pack of Tums, while the other pressed a damp towel to her forehead. Both girls patted and stroked their friend. They told her they would take her home. And with that, Mary left and Liz followed her into the damp heat of an ordinary summer night.

The Winner's Circle

"I can tell that guy likes me," Dot whispered to her sister Mary about Daryll, before getting up to bowl. What Mary heard, however, was "I can tell he likes me *more than you*," and she took this as a challenge. Even though he was nice looking and he bought their drinks, Mary didn't feel particularly interested until Dot provoked her. Later Daryll would tell Mary that there really was no competition.

It wasn't the beer she'd been sipping all night that made Mary grow giddy. It was teasing Dot. And she was on her game. Even Dot was in stitches.

"You're such a bitch," Dot tried to say, but couldn't quite get it out because she was laughing so hard. Her sister's laughter, Mary knew, arose out of frustration, like when she threw her losing hand of cards down on the table. Mary didn't tell one real joke because she knew that Dot had a large repertoire and was a much better joke teller. Instead, she laughed and laughed and laughed in her shotgun way. Sometimes she would laugh so hard that she'd raise her hand to slap her knee and miss, hitting Daryll on the leg, then she'd blush and bat her big brown eyes. When it was Dot's turn to bowl, Mary made "ba boom" sounds each step Dot took toward the lane. Dot did manage to sit next to Daryll once, but Mary one-upped her by losing her balance, landing right on Daryll's lap.

After last call they went to breakfast. Mary and Dot took one look at each other and instantly knew what the other was thinking—"There's no way you're sitting next to him." They fought for that spot as if the seating arrangements corresponded with winner's circle. Daryll's last minute trip to the bathroom cost Mary the win. With Dot sitting next to Daryll, Mary lightly shoved her sister in the arm, conceding, but gloated her victory, when the two of them were alone in their room: Daryll had asked Mary for her phone number.

For three months, Daryll told Mary stories of what their lives might be like together. They were happy stories. Safe stories. Working as a delivery driver for a drycleaner gave Daryll plenty of opportunities during the day to stop at the diner to visit Mary. He'd always greet her with the clicking giddy-up sound a horseman might make. Mary's boss would let her take her break at the counter when Daryll visited, so she'd sit with him, talking and smoking. Before he'd leave, he'd say "You lookin good, bayba." Then he'd squeeze her face into a pucker, kissing her lips with a loud smacking sound.

When Mary missed her period, she only told Daryll. Each day on her breaks, Daryll talked future, talked happily-ever-after. He was going to protect her, and she was going to make a home for all of them. After she missed two, Daryll gave Mary a choice between an inexpensive new ring or his aunt Emma's. Mary remembered admiring aunt Emma's diamond and smiled with anticipation.

The two of them planned how they'd tell Mary's mom, Bert. Daryll insisted on being there.

"I'll surprise her with carry-out chicken," Daryll offered.

Mary laughed, knowing what her mom would do with the chicken, but Daryll didn't see what was funny.

"What then?"

"We just act happy and tell her."

Bert congratulated Mary and Daryll with a tone that made Daryll feel weak in the knees, so he left as soon as he could. That night Bert said nothing to Mary, who had expected her mom to be furious because she'd forbade Mary to see that good-for-nothing Daryll, telling her she was too good for him and that he could only offer her hardship. When she begged her mom to say *something*, Bert said only, "You must have spite in your butt, to go to bed with him."

That night Dot tried to comfort her sister. "What does that mean anyway? Spite in your butt?" The two laughed at the words their mother came up with.

"She'll get used to it, Mary."

Mary nodded then recounted Daryll's promises that were to become her future. Dot listened, glad Mary had beat her in the final round.

For Mary's wedding, Bert baked a yellow cake that she decorated with blue flowers. She stayed up an entire weekend sewing an all season Paris fashion suit for Mary that she accented with large mother-of-pearl buttons.

Although there was no money for a real honeymoon, Daryll told Mary his dad had offered them his apartment for the weekend. He told her it would be just the two of them, that he'd make it special, bringing her breakfast in bed, playing games, or doing whatever she wanted. He planned to spoil her for two full days and nights.

On the first day of her honeymoon, Mary woke to a slap on her bare behind.

"Rise and shine, sleepy head," Orville, Daryll's dad, yelled as he walked past her bed.

It took her a few seconds to register what just happened, then she grabbed her robe and ran for the bathroom without breath. She locked the door, before the explosion of tears.

When he knocked, Mary let Daryll in the bathroom.

"Daryll, I want to go home."

"Well, where is that? We don't have one yet."

"But you said—"

"Hurry up you two, I need to get in there."

Mary stared at the closed door. She knew her father-in-law waited on the other side listening to their private conversation, so she held back her anger, shoving past Daryll then her father-in-law. Choked up, she garbled a sarcastic, "Thanks for making this special," then ran to her bed. She covered her face with the sheet, expecting Daryll to follow. But he didn't. The tiny white-gold band that was her wedding ring felt like a tourniquet. She tried to take it off, so she could throw it at him, but her hands swelled too much. She hated wearing this ring. It was ugly. When she agreed to accept aunt Emma's ring, it never occurred to her Darryl meant this narrow band without its diamond accompaniment. She suddenly felt the urge to eat something sweet, so she got dressed and walked into the kitchen. There she realized Daryll had left her, alone with Orville.

"Where's Daryll?"

"Buying cigarettes."

Mary blushed. Her eyes filled with water.

"Mary, I. . .I'm sorry 'bout. . .I didn't mean. . .Well, it ain't nothin I haven't seen before."

With downward eyes, she responded in an almost whisper, "You. . .embarrassed me."

"Like an orange?" Orville asked, handing a piece of fruit to Mary.

Mary took it, happy to have something to do with her hands and a place to rest her self-conscious eyes. Holding the fruit between both palms, she squeezed, releasing its bitter oil. She couldn't think of anything to say to Daryll's dad, so she sat there, trying to peel the orange in one piece like the fancy way her mom peeled apples. But the orange skin was too thick. She smiled to herself thinking that if Dot were here they could play the fortune-teller game where Mary would hold a piece of the orange skin between her fingers while Dot looked deeply into its pores. After spraying its acid, Dot would be able to see Mary's future through a veil of stinging eyes.

Sixty Thousand and not a Penny More

Mary wanted to sell her house and buy a new one because in the vacant house next door animals and crack dealers did their business. She tried for two years to get building declared an eyesore, so the city would be forced to demolish it, but the best the city could come up with was a no-trespassing sign, which served the addicts and the dealers in much the same way as Mary's welcome mat that sat beneath her front door.

If she hadn't had two young girls and if these new neighbors hadn't decided to hang out on the roof of her own garage, maybe she could have tolerated their business by blocking her view of them with taller bushes, but she couldn't risk her husband handling things. The last time he tried to take care of the situation, Mary found him tossing liquid from a can of gasoline onto that house.

"I'll fix them."

"Our house is wood, you'll fix us, too," Mary told him, so she began looking for a house that she would like as much as this one and one that would be safe for her family. She found it, a home with a built-in pool, something she had dreamt about since she was a girl. She made sure that she wasn't moving into the same situation by knocking on doors and asking what the neighbors thought about the people who lived in that neighborhood. From this she learned all of the nearby homes were occupied by chatty people from whom she discovered that the man and the woman selling the house with the pool were having a nasty divorce and were in dire straights. Mary decided to make an offer, negotiated a deal to be proud of, and put a for-sale-by-owner sign in her front yard.

From a real estate agent, Mary found out everything she needed to know in order to sell her house herself. She told the agent that she would like to take a month to try selling it without the agent's help to save on commission fees, and the agent, certain that the house would not sell

for Mary's asking price of eighty thousand dollars, told Mary he would see her in a month. That was the plan.

Mary found a buyer, the first inquirer—a young couple with a baby on the way. They knocked on the door during the family Friday-night card game. With Wiedeman beer and bourbon and cokes on the table, this young couple made their offer to Daryll, Mary's husband, the man of the house. They offered the asking price. Mary, thinking she should have asked for more money, for a split second thought Daryll was going to negotiate now for just that—more money; *instead*, he said, "Aw no, that's too much."

It was one of those moments where everyone heard what they had expected to hear, and the young man said that he could not go up any higher. He had been pre-approved for a loan for this amount and that he was not sure if the bank would approve a higher loan.

"Not a penny more, I said, I'll take sixty thousand and not a penny more."

Raw-Headed-Bloody-Bones

Liz watched the swirling threads of color mingle into a little ball and dance across her grandma's wall and ceiling. It suddenly leapt out of sight, prompting Liz to say in her little girl voice, "Where'd he go?" Then Bert looked around the room as if seriously trying to find Liz's man of light. When the prism from Bert's water glass caught the sun again from the open window, "there he is," Liz delighted then watched for hours her private ballet. Even before Liz's grandma came to live with them, Bert would entertain Liz with mystery and magic. Each Friday, Liz would beg Bert to let her and Marie spend the night and in the morning beg for pancakes that Bert would shape into cartoon characters or sometimes animals. Bert never actually intended any particular form. Standing on a chair, Liz and Marie guessed what their pancakes were, awed by Grandma Bert's magic.

Bert filled Liz's head with stories of monsters, her favorite, the adventures of Raw-headed-bloody-bones, who made his home in one of Bert's closets. Liz was petrified of Raw-headed-bloody-bones. Not only did he not care much for little girls, but he liked to eat arms that dangled out of beds. At night Marie would wake Liz by shaking her arm, telling her that it was dangling or telling her that she saw Raw-headed-bloody-bones creep out of the closet and didn't know where he went. Liz looked and thought she saw the monster hide behind the bonsai-looking tree inside the dark velvet painting that hung on the wall. Because Grandma Bert had told Liz that if Raw-headed-bloody-bones wasn't careful he'd get stuck in that painting, Liz told Marie not to worry that Raw-headed-bloody-bones hid in that velvet place and was stuck there for the night.

On one of these Friday nights, while Liz and Marie battled with their monster, Mary sat at on a bar stool with her legs crossed and sipped her CC and seven, twiddling a cigarette wrapper. Daryll had lost $50 in the pinball machine and had moved on to the bowling machine. He could

feel the loss building up inside his muscles and banged on the machine when it didn't count his pin. Squeezing the wooden ball in his hand, he looked up to see the back of a man's head nodding as if talking to Mary.

"Who does he think he is, talking to my wife," Daryll thought and walked over to the bar. His face scrunched on one side. His nose broadened.

"That's my wife you're talking to, nigger."

"Hey man, I don't want any trouble. I was just makin small talk."

"Daryll, he wasn't doin nothin."

"Oh yeah."

"Come on now, man. I'm just waitin on a drink."

"Now, I'm not playin. That's my wife."

"Bartender, can I have my drink."

"Look if you don't get outta here. . ."

"I don't want any trouble, just my drink."

Daryll squeezed the hard ball in his hand. It made his fist cartoon like.

Mary recognized the glint that passed before Daryll's left eye. Before that Mr. Hyde of a fist raised, Mary screamed, "Noooo Daryll, we was just talkin."

But it was too late.

As the man turned his head to face Daryll, the wooden ball crashed into his face, three or five times before a couple of guys could pull the exhilarated Daryll off.

"The cops are on their way."

Daryll grunted the ball at the stranger and threw his bloody arm around Mary.

"I showed you. Ya won't mess with me again. Will ya, you son-of-a-gun?" and kicked the man where he wasn't bloody.

~

Mary and Daryll were in bed by the time the police came to arrest Daryll.

"That son-of-a-gun was messin with my wife. Don't I have the right to protect my wife?"

"I know how you feel. I don't like guys thinking they can do whatever with mine."

"Do you have to arrest *me*? What about him? That nigger was askin for trouble?

"You could swear out a warrant for him."

~

After Daryll had left in the squad car, without handcuffs, Mary drove to her mother's.

Bert handed Mary a hundred dollar bill to bail out Daryll.

"Thanks. I'll pay you back next month. Okay?"

"That's fine. But I can't help you next month if he needs bailing out."

"Then his dad can get his butt outta jail. Or he can sit there."

"It's always something."

In the dark of the morning, Liz woke. Her cold feet tiptoed into the kitchen. She folded the napkins in triangles the way Bert had taught her and finished setting the table for breakfast. Then she snuck back to bed, holding her breath as she walked. Giddy, imagining Grandma Bert believing the fairies set the table, Liz had a hard time falling back to sleep. When she woke again, Marie was looking through Bert's jewelry box.

"Marie, what are you doing?"

Marie jumped. "Nothing."

"Get back in bed. You know we're not allowed out of bed till Grandma gets up."

Neither Liz nor Marie had heard Bert. And she surprised them both. "Marie!" Bert shouted. "What are you doing?" Marie screamed. Her arms naturally flying in the air as if surrendering. Liz let out a shocked. "Ah."

Bert picked Marie up by the shoulders and set her down hard on the bed. She put her pointer finger on Marie's nose.

"Don't you cry. Don't you dare."

"Sorry."

"You're lucky Raw-headed-bloody-bones didn't get you."

"He's in the picture. Liz saw him there"

"Didn't you see him. He got out," Bert told them with a serious look.

Liz looked at the painting. The light from the window made it look like it was daytime in there, too.

"He only gets stuck in there at night?" Liz asked.

"I don't know. I think he has a friend in there."

"Grandma? Will you make pancakes?"

Bert smiled knowingly at Liz and rubbed her hand along her back.

"Guess what?"

"What?"

"The fairies must have set the table."

Marie glared at Liz.

Two nights before his court appearance, Daryll had come home on time. He brought ribs from the Rib Pit. Mary and Daryll sat on their rent-to-own couch and laughed at the poem Daryll wrote inside the Forget me Not greeting card:

Pretty Mary sat on a stool.

She teased and made men drool

What could her poor husband do

Except protect her from their poo

And love her like no one ever will.

He signed it, "I love you, babe."

Mary kissed Daryll.

"You know babe, if you don't want me to go to jail, you're going to have to tell the judge somethin."

"But won't I be under oath?"

"Yeah, but. . ."

"If you'd rather see me in jail."

"He never. . ."

"He got what he deserved."

On the morning of his court appearance, Daryll woke with a black eye. Mary screamed that the judge would never believe her now. Daryll told her to shut up.

Mary knew that she didn't have a choice. She didn't want Daryll to lose his job. They were finally making enough money so that she didn't have to look at prices at the grocery.

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After she had taken her oath, she didn't dare look over at the man whose forehead sunk in instead of protruding and who drooled into a rag.

By then, Daryll had already told how the man was whispering something in Mary's ear. That she was crying for him to help her. That the man wouldn't leave her alone even when he told him to leave. That he was drunk. When he told him she was his wife, the man made a crude gesture and socked Daryll in the face. His eye was still black and blue. Daryll told how he was just defending himself and his.

Mary was so nervous that she breathed in short tight breaths.

"Did this man threaten you," she was asked.

She tried to answer, but her vocal cords tightened when she tried to speak and no words could come out. She nodded.

"What did he say to you?"

"I can't really say."

"Why not."

"I can't say."

"Did he do the things your husband says?"

Mary nodded then broke down in silent shaking heaves of tears. Her tears burned like accusations of some horrible unspeakable thing.

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Daryll celebrated his victory with his dad and the guys at the saloon. He dropped Mary off at her mom's. It was on his way. There she followed the sounds of laughter to the bathroom where Bert blew soap bubbles with her girls.

The Interview

Mary never felt comfortable in school, especially high school, where she had lowered her eyes at the mere suggestion of being asked a question by a straight-lipped nun. Since that time, Mary avoided things and people that made her feel lesser than she wanted to be. In high school, she envisioned herself with happy children to play with, a handsome husband to care for her, and a life filled with dinner parties. But now, in her mid-twenties, that's not how things had worked out.

One morning, however, Mary woke up with a feeling that she could have such a life, and she knew exactly what she would do: she would call the number from the advertisement of a company not too far away that was looking for a microfiche copier, whatever that was. She would apply for that position without experience because the ad said "will train," and she felt that she could do the job because she was a hard worker and learned quickly and wanted something better.

The phone interview went better than even Mary had expected. They invited her to come in for an interview immediately as they wanted to hire someone right away, and Mary sounded like a good match for the position. Mary called her mom who told her to send the girls over in a cab, which she did, then hurriedly applied eyeliner that accentuated her large round brown eyes and dressed herself in her brown skirt and matching blouse. She twisted her hair in the French way then smiled to herself in the mirror.

The interviewer gave Mary a tour to show her what she would be doing, and Mary walked through each department as if she had grown up there, feeling as if she were born to be there, and the interviewer felt this way too, about Mary, and offered her the job. Mary told her that she would need to think about it and would call her tomorrow to let her know what she had decided. They shook each other's hands, and Mary left, walking past the bus stop, feeling high with possibility.

That night Mary dreamt of Mother of Mercy High, the eraser that got thrown in her direction for not knowing, nor attempting to answer the nun's question, and her heart pounded in exactly the same pitch that it had at that moment, and she imagined herself messing up on her new job, watching the eyes of coworkers avoid making eye contact with her because they found out that she wasn't who she said she was, and when she dreamt of the nice lady interviewer's disappointment, her asking why Mary had lied about herself, Mary knew what she had to do.

The next morning as promised she called the interviewer, who was happy to hear from Mary. Mary told her that she was sorry that she had wasted her time, but she had decided to stay home with her children.

Slamming Doors

Mary pulled the rollers out of Liz's hair that had become tangled over night. She squirmed and held her leaking eyes, trying to avoid being cracked with the back of the brush. Mary sprayed Liz's hair with Aqua Net. She wanted Liz's hair perfect for her first day of kindergarten. Brushing it straight back with one hand while grasping the whole of it with the other, Mary secured Liz's hair high on her head with a rubber band. She sprayed it again, smoothing down any fly aways. Then she methodically wrapped small sections of hair around her finger, making a mass of ringlets out of Liz's ponytail. She sprayed it to stay that way, thinking Liz's hair looked like the doll Mary had treasured as a child.

Liz walked into her new school holding her mother's hand, making sure to keep her back straight. After entering her kindergarten classroom where lots of other children were playing, Liz asked her mom if she could go play on the teeter-totter. She kissed her mom goodbye and ran.

Mary felt cheated that Liz had not clung to her as many of the other children had done. She did not cry or plead with their mothers to stay. And Mary felt she deserved that. The pretty little girl with the curly brown hair begged her mother to stay. Mary discovered this little girl's name was Beverly Hill. They lived one block away. Beverly's mother, Brenda, and Mary became fast friends, walking their girls back and forth to school. They talked and walked. Brenda invited Mary for coffee where they drank two pots before they realized it was time to walk back. Most days Mary found herself forgetting to eat, feeling happy and entertained.

The first day of school flew by for Liz. She loved the teeter totter and story time and the little box of milk and saltines. Mary had taught Liz how to tell time, so Liz became nervous knowing that her time was almost up. She wanted to stay longer. Sitting cross-legged on the floor during story time, Liz watched how the minute hand hesitated before it made its leap to the next point in time as if it felt her desire to slow down. The closer it came to the time her mom said she

would be back, the more intense this feeling became. When she saw her mom waiting outside the door, she couldn't stop tears from jumping out of her eyes. She remained very still in her seat until Mrs. Werry told all the children to line up. Then she could no longer contain her sadness. It was over. After the room emptied, Mary looked at Mrs. Werry.

"What happened."

"I don't know. She got along well."

"Liz, what happened?"

"It was my turn for the teeter totter."

Mrs. Werry smiled at Mary.

"Let's go home, Liz."

"I'm not ready."

"Well, this is a first. I've seen children cry to leave their mothers, but not cry to stay in school."

~

For Thanksgiving, Mrs. Werry planned for her students to draw turkeys by tracing the outline of their hands. Liz's friend Beverly's turkey resembled a turkey more than a hand, and Liz's turkey resembled a hand with different colored fingers. Walking home from school with Beverly and her mom, Liz wore her pasted paper headdress. Usually she dreaded art projects, but Mrs. Werry told the class there's no wrong way, so Liz mixed red with aquamarine and copper with blue. She made sure to include one of each color from her box of Crayolas. She traced outline of her hand. The color between the lines became bridges that connected each finger. Two eyes were not enough for such a turkey. Her turkey would have eyes on every feather. Eyes with long eyelashes. She pasted tissue paper in the palm, picking the pink, green, and yellow.

For her Indian headdress, she really let loose. Mrs. Werry let her cut long strips of tissue that she pasted up, down, left, right, a paper wig of many colors. She had her masterpiece. It smelled of wax and paste and tasted of comfort food.

Brenda had walked the girls home alone on this day because Mary had an appointment. At Mary's house, Brenda said she couldn't stay. Mary thanked her then threw her head back and closed her eyes to laugh when she saw Liz walk inside.

"I'm an Indian."

"I didn't know."

"Did someone bring cupcakes?" Mary asked pointing to the cupcake being mashed in Liz's hand.

"Yeah, we had candy too. I saved my cupcake for Marie."

"I want a cupcake," Marie, Liz's sister, said and reached out, but Mary interrupted.

"Liz, take it in the kitchen."

Liz sat with her sister while she ate her cupcake, telling her all she had to look forward to next year.

"Liz, did you make this, it's really good," Mary yelled from the other room.

Liz looked at Marie, who was mostly interested in licking the icing off her fingers. Then Liz skipped into the other room.

"This turkey's really good, Liz."

Liz beamed. Then she looked at the turkey that resembled a real turkey.

"That's not mine."

Mary paged through the stack of papers that had Beverly Hill's name on them.

"Shoot. Brenda must have left Beverly's papers with yours."

"There's mine, Mommy."

It wasn't shock nor disappointment that registered on Mary's face, but fear. The eyes on each finger took on a sinister quality. She held up Beverly's turkey next to Liz's. Her eyes moved from each representation back to Liz. Beverly's turkey seemed to Mary what a normal child would draw. Liz's looked retarded, and Mary was embarrassed.

"What were you trying to do, Liz?"

"I made a turkey from my hand."

"Is that what you think a turkey looks like."

"I guess," Liz said looking at both drawings, then at the floor.

Mary was relieved to get a doctor's appointment for Saturday because she didn't want to give back Beverly's drawing until she got a second opinion. If Liz was retarded, she wanted to know right away.

Waiting for Dr. Gregory, Liz looked down at her chest and could see her heart beating. She didn't want to be retarded like her cousin who tried to drown her in the pool last summer. When she heard Dr. Gregory's white leather shoes tapping down the hallway, panic raced to her face.

"There she is," Dr. Gregory teased, wagging his finger at Liz. She loved Dr. Gregory.

"Mother, what's going on with this pretty girl?"

Mary set the drawings on the examining table. Dr. Gregory looked at Mary and laughed.

"I'm still full from Thanksgiving." Examining the drawings, he said, "These are nice turkeys. Did you make these, Liz?"

Before Liz had a chance to answer, Mary said that's what she wanted to talk to him about and explained her worries.

"Now mother, all children are different. This artwork is perfectly normal. Both of them. There's nothing wrong with our little Picasso," he said winking at Liz.

"But shouldn't she be able to stay in the lines."

"Mother, look at my handwriting. Maybe she'll be a doctor, too. And you," he said pointing towards Liz, "keep making pictures."

Dr. Gregory wrote "no charge" for the amount of service and clicked down the hallway and into the next room.

~

Junior high excited Liz. She heard you pick your own courses and make your own schedule. She was tired of having to walk in a straight line when passing from Language Arts to

Math class. Mrs. Faulkner, who didn't look like a little girl even though she wore knee socks, called Liz to her desk, handed her a letter, and asked her to give it to her mother. For some unexplained reason, Liz wasn't curious what was in that letter nor what was in the return one her mom sent to Mrs. Faulkner. When Mrs. Faulkner received Mary's note, she called Liz to her desk.

"Liz, did your mom talk to you about going to Walnut Hills."

"Where Ryan and Jenny are going?

"Don't you want to go there?

"To the college prep school? Yeah, I do, but I don't have a way to get there.

"Transportation is provided, don't worry about that."

"Really?

That night Liz asked her mom if she could go to Walnut Hills because that's where the kids who are going to college are going.

"I told your teacher that I didn't want you to go there."

"Why not, what's wrong with it?"

"I just don't think you should."

"Why not?"

"It's a school for smart kids."

"So."

"What if you go there and can't keep up? What then? You'll have to start at a new school. I've done that, the older you get, the harder. What's wrong with Dater?"

"Nothing. Mrs. Faulkner said if I want to go to college then I should go to Walnut Hills."

"You don't have to go there to go to college. Anyway that school's all black."

"So what? All my friends are going there."

Mary's silence upset Liz.

"If you really don't want me to go, I'll tell Mrs. Faulkner."

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"Liz, your mom must have forgotten to sign you up for college prep courses at Dater," Mrs. Faulkner whispered to Liz, conscious of the other kids growing interest in their conversations.

"What?"

"I can't enroll you in them without her signature."

Mrs. Faulkner sat on Liz's desk and showed her the places where her mom should sign. She tucked Liz's hair behind her ear.

"Don't worry Liz. When a door slams shut, it usually pops right back open."

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"Please, mommy." Liz pleaded. I want to be in the harder classes. I passed the test."

"Tests don't mean nothin."

"Please, I can do it."

Mary shook her head in disgust, remembering the hot shame of being singled out by Sister Margaret Catherine. The eraser thrown in her direction. Her shyness interpreted as indifference.

"Fine. Don't come to me looking for signatures when you want out."

"It's not that hard."

"You'll see."
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Spit Tobacco an' I'll Let Ya Go

The rhythm of crickets chirping soothed Mary, lulling her to sleep. As if awake, her hand reached out, grasped something intangible.

"Spit tobacca an' I'll let ya go," she said to the thing in her hand. She laughed. Opened her eyes to find nothing between her fingers. She closed her eyes, willed herself back to that dream place, that secret childhood place she shared with her sister.

In her dream, *Mary and Dot woke up early and dressed in the new halter-tops with matching shorts their mom, Bert, had stayed up the previous night making. Waiting for them to finish dressing, Bert lifted the picnic basket of chicken in her left hand and with her right held an unfiltered Lucky Strike. Both Mary and Dot hoped to sleep in the car on their way to their grandma's house, as it was still dark, but Bert had rolled down the windows, tormenting their pale skin, making it look like the chicken's before it was fried. Bert's steel colored eyes lit up, and she smiled at them in the rear-view mirror. She sucked in as much air as she could through her nose and released it with a big open mouthed, "Ah, fresh air." This prompted a knowing smirk from Mary, who scooted her bottom closer to Dot and Dot pressed her shoulder into Mary's. They leaned forward pressing their heads into the seat in front of them and let the coolness pass over. Bert, feeling their strength in the back of her seat, turned the radio up, and drove to her mom's house singing Chattanooga Choo Choo.*

Mary and Dot arrived in the country at their grandma's with a change of clothes and strict instructions to sit on the porch until their grandma got up, to be good quiet girls, and to enjoy their vacation. They kissed their mom goodbye on her cheek and without speaking raced up to the porch swing where they sat until late morning playing silent games with each other.

Each day spent in the country was for Mary and Dot a daylong adventure. In the woods they found vines to climb and swing on. And when they got hungry, they could sneak over to Old

Man Schwartz's whose farm was filled with apple, cherry, and pear trees and who made a living off potatoes and corn. Since Mary loved to climb trees, she would pick the fruit and throw it down to Dot, who would stick them in her top. Either Old Man Schwartz was tipped off or Mary and Dot were lousy thieves because whenever they practiced their craft, he would always come running out with his shotgun and pretend he was going to shoot. This always caused a great deal of little-girl squealing and flailing of arms and legs.

After a week or so, they got so lonesome for their mom that they couldn't stop crying, so they called her and begged her to come and take them home. Bert came right over, but after dinner, Mary and Dot went into the woods to play and made a discovery. They called it "The Secret of Clay Mountain." It was a place only they knew. The magic of this new place enticed them, so they begged Bert to let them stay.

Mary woke up first the next morning and tickled Dot on her neck to wake her. Dot's eyes opened blankly but came alive with the thought of Clay Mountain. They left without breakfast but not without taking a couple potatoes and a pack of matches to build a fire. Mary pointed to the shortcut and Dot followed with her arm wrapped around Mary's shoulder. It was even more beautiful in the morning light. Dot stood and Mary sat on a rock. Neither could move as the light swirled down to the pool of water where the fish seemed an extension of the sun's warm gaze.

Mary went over to one side of the clayed cul-de-sac and pulled out a couple of saplings and used them to dig the green, gray earth and shape it into pets. When she had made three puppies, she looked over at Dot who said, "Mine's a cat." They decided to put their new family together to see if they would fight like cats and dogs. When the cat had lost its head, Mary spied a grasshopper that she caught by its back legs.

"Don't let it go, Mary," Dot begged. And she didn't, until brownish stuff came out of its mouth. When this happened, they looked at each other, both holding their breaths. Then, Dot, trying to talk through her choking sounds of laughter, pointed and said, "That grasshopper chews tobacco." Mary grabbed him from under a leaf. She could feel his legs respond to the stimulation of her fingers, and like a slow easy gallop, her fingers instinctively moved with his rhythm. "Spit

tobacca an' I'll let ya go," she promised. The rest of the morning they played with grasshoppers, begging for the release of that dark substance that each held within.

Because they knew their lunch of baked potatoes would take a while on the fire, Dot had already started it and had tossed in the potatoes. Each girl had taken turns adding more twigs, keeping the fire going, not blazing just a slow burning fire that made the potatoes hard flesh soft and tender.

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In the morning, Mary woke up hungry for potatoes, so she fried some with eggs. Even though she knew roads now surrounded the place they had called The Secret of Clay Mountain, she still remembered it as a magical place, a mountain of clay, hidden from the world. She had often tried to duplicate the sweet taste of those potatoes that she cooked with Dot that summer, but nothing ever tasted as sweet. It was one of the unanswered secrets of Clay Mountain.

That afternoon, Mary called Dot and together they decided to share their magic place with Mary's daughters Liz and Marie.

"What's so secret about it," Liz asked on the drive.

"I don't know. That's just what we called it."

"What is it?"

"You'll see. It's The Secret of Clay Mountain."

Liz looked at her sister Marie who stared out the window blankly, wondering if they would stop for an ice cream on the way home.

They parked the car on the street and climbed down into the creek.

Dot said, "This is it." She instantly took off her shirt and shorts and climbed into the creek. After a few minutes, noticing no talking, she looked up at the dropped jaws around her and said, "You don't mind that I took off my clothes?"

"As long as you don't mind that I leave mine on," Mary coughed a laugh.
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Mary decided to show Liz and Marie what grasshoppers do. Liz found one, but she wouldn't touch it. It disappeared.

"What does tobacco look like?" Liz asked.

"I don't think any grows here."

"Then, how can they spit…"

"Here's some for ya." And her aunt Dot tossed her cigarette butt.

"Mom, really. Where does the tobacco juice come from, then?"

"When you hold their legs, they tell you what they think by spitting their thoughts. That's why it's brown and icky.

Liz looked at her mom, then her aunt, then Marie to be sure they weren't teasing her.

"If I could find one, I'd show you. After they tell you what they think, they are happy bugs. They become light as air. They can fly."

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Mary hoped the magic of Clay Mountain would stay with her through the following weekend when she was to give a talk on grace at a women's retreat. But that day, she was a wreck. Even though her talk was scheduled for after lunch, she hadn't eaten, hadn't slept much, and had already smoked a pack of cigarettes by the time it was her turn.

When she was about to speak, she imagined herself a grasshopper, spitting out secrets she'd been protecting. She felt her stomach rise to her throat, moved there by the quivering of her legs, and when she began to speak, water poured from her eyes, at first clear, then black from mascara that streamed then stuck to her as it dried. There she sat and let the dark stuff out.

Although her talk was supposed to be about grace and its effect on her life, she talked about its absence. How unfair it was that everyone believed her Daryll such a great guy when no one knows how he really is, how he's caused her face to swell with bruises, made her wait in cold cars with Liz for hours while he had *one more beer* and how he gambled with rent money and grocery money. She talked for forty-five minutes listing how she's suffered in private. As she
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spoke her face grew blacker. She felt the kind of relief that comes with exhaustion. Mary closed her eyes and imagined herself light as a feather, lifted and held up with esteem. Knowing the women who surrounded her empathized with the harshness of her stories, even admired her for her courage and strength, for that brief instant, she felt peace.

Instead of going straight home, Mary drove toward the setting sun, letting red sky and warm night air breeze by.

Instincts

The "animal," unlike the normal human consciousness, knows no limitations or restrictions, just action and reaction, where the primal self directs the body. Where thought is concerned, there is always restriction and slow reaction.

~Tom Brown Jr., *The Way of the Scout*

Liz inhaled through her nose and mouth and tasted the bakery's home-sweet-home scents. She felt light and nostalgic. The combination of old faces, permanent press pants, peeling grey linoleum, and the dial telephone with the twisted, dirty cord rushed Liz with memories. Standing and looking through the mounds of baked goods, she began to daydream. She sat once again at her grandma Bert's table. Sucking her upper lip, Liz imagined sweet butter and icing stuck there. She remembered how grandma Bert would glob butter or oleo-margarine on a danish or piece of strudel, sip black coffee, and reminisce, sometimes, about playing the fiddle or singing on the radio or bumming around during the depression. But mostly about how tough and resourceful she'd been. "Times were hard and everyone'd walk all over you, if you let them."

Shaking her head, Liz started to say *I won't let them* until she noticed the people around her, wondering if the skinny man with the fat belt just cut the line in front of her.

"You didn't know your grandpa," her grandmother had told her. "He'd take a mile if gave him an inch. But I fixed him. Just needed my cast-iron treatment, like your dad needs. Brawn's no match for wit."

Liz smiled to herself remembering how she'd believed the cast-iron story long after her grandmother's death. How she had begged for her to retell it. Sometimes the story's details would become more fantastical, other times brutal, still strangely funny. Always her grandmother would say he hit me *once*. Then she would describe how she'd delivered his treatment by tricking him, serving him plenty of whiskey, acting like she'd been humbled by the slap. Even washed and

pressed his sheets. When he was sound asleep, she rolled his body in the freshly starched sheets, making a kind of straightjacket. Then she pummeled him with her biggest cast-iron skillet. After that, he knew she was smarter and never bothered her like that again.

Even this morning, in her early thirties, Liz believed in this fantastic story. Frying pan for torch, her grandmother's statue-of-liberty image burned in her brain, devoid of real pain and heavy with triumph, like a cartoon.

The bakery's yeasty sweet smells continued to ravage Liz. They bubbled up and expanded into a panoramic vision. There her grandmother kneaded dough for bread or pastries with large arms that resembled dough rising. Her arms flapped back and forth with fury as she punched down dough. She promised Liz that the punished dough would be stronger, when it rose again.

When the store clerk called out "next" and stared at Liz, she became flustered: bringing too many of one doughnut and not enough of another to her parent's house could set off an argument. Her hesitation provoked from behind the counter a louder, more impatient, "next." Just before the bifocaled lady with the teased hair took Liz's turn, Liz ordered like crazy. She asked for a dozen clunkers, her mother's favorite, half a dozen peanut rolls and a "goo" cake for her dad, a dozen danish, a dozen glazed donuts, and since she couldn't remember if her mom liked the French or Bavarian cream, she opted for three of each. For herself she added a jelly roll because it was her grandma Bert's favorite. When she ate it she'd sing, *You aint' gettin none of my jellyroll*, to which Liz would beg for a piece simply to hear her sing it again.

Once inside her car, Liz reached under the visor for her sunglasses and sat for a moment, feeling the warm blanket of a sun-heated car. Since she'd gone directly to the bakery from her first kickboxing class, the heat felt especially nice on her now slightly chilled skin.

During the class, the instructor tried to up the energy by yelling for everyone to imagine an ungrateful boss or maybe a backstabbing friend or coworker's face, then *jab, jab, jab*. Liz couldn't conjure this face although with each jab she felt exhilarated, her burning shoulders oddly comforted. Making it through the whole class had surprised Liz, and she still felt the strange combination of being tired yet energized. After class, her legs itched, blotchy from the sudden

rushing of blood to her skin, her cheeks rosy. There, she undid her ponytail, shook and scrunched her wet strands, then took a deep breath and smelled her own saltiness.

"See you next week?" Jane, the instructor, asked Liz as she made her way towards the door.

"Depends how sore I am."

"Come anyway. I promise you'll feel better."

Liz quickly glanced at Jane's muscles that formed curves in her arms and legs. Smiling at this fireplug woman, Liz nodded in agreement and waved, walking out the door. Outside, the sun shone bright, making the air feel crisp as a starched shirt. Light reflected off cars in the parking lot, hurting Liz's eyes, and causing her to cower slightly, blocking the brightness with her hands.

It had been more than a decade since Liz moved from her parent's house, but even then she felt uncomfortable walking in without knocking, yet even stranger, ringing the doorbell and waiting for it to be opened, so she always knocked at the kitchen door, then went inside. As she walked in Mary, her mother, came into the room, turning on the lights, wearing a pink robe flecked with teddy bears.

"I brought donuts," Liz told her mom, holding up both bags.

Mary nodded and stretched. Arching, she pressed her left fist into her lower back, her right above her head, making an mmm sound.

"I got your favorite."

"Make the coffee would ya?"

Liz smiled at her mom, made the coffee, and plated up the bakery goods. While she did this, her mom sat opening and closing a greeting card. Liz saw that it was another unsigned Forget-Me-Not that her dad had been getting in the mail and figured that the card was probably adding to her mother's agitation. When Mary dialed her sister, Dot, Liz felt somewhat more at ease, relieved of the pressure she felt to cheer her up.

"Hello, my little girl." Daryll said. Patting Liz on her back.

Since she could remember her dad called her "my little girl." The way he said *my little girl* had made her feel uncomfortable for some time. She couldn't say exactly why.

"Hey dad, I took a kickboxing class."

Not looking at her as he filled his plate with half the cake and a thickly buttered peanut roll, he laughed, asking, "What'd the other guy look like?" Then he took his plate and coffee and headed for his room.

As Liz followed Daryll to tell him about the class, her mother's speech patterns changed. Still talking into the phone, she spoke slow and loud. "He thinks I'm stupid."

Liz looked at her mom. She knew initiating chitchat with her father when her parent's were fighting could be interpreted as siding with him. Since her mom continued talking in a regular tone, Liz felt safe.

"Throwing punches felt really good."

"Oh, yeah," Daryll said, looking at the TV.

"Yeah, it was an advanced class, so I thought I'd only make it half-way through, but each jab felt like a bolt of energy, so I kept going." Liz demonstrated punches, adding a few kicks for measure. "I think maybe I'm a chip off—"

"First of all, if you hit someone with your hand like that you'd break it."

"Well, how—"

"Do it like this."

Liz straightened her wrist like Daryll's.

"And it's not just about that. You got to be ready. Ya know? When we used to go down the saloon for a fight, I went ready. I'd stand outside, blow my nose, hard. Then I'd tie my shoes, double, tuck my shirt in my underwear, so it'd stay. Even if I had done it earlier, I'd do it all again. When I'd go inside, I'd look for the biggest guy in the joint. He'd either fight me or leave. Whoever has that kind of power gets respect. See? When you're ready, you can't lose. When you're ready, you don't hesitate. Hear me?"

Holding his hand up flat in front of Liz, he told her, "Now hit me as hard as you can."

"What if I miss?"

"Just throw a punch."

Liz cocked her arm and closed her eyes. She opened them when she heard the loud smack of her fist in her dad's hand.

"See, I think I'm a prodigy."

"Prodigy, huh?"

"Yeah, what's funny? Why wouldn't I be a good fighter, if I practiced?"

"Liz, it don't matter if you practice night and day, you just don't got it."

"Got what?"

"The instinct."

"What instinct?"

"The *killer* instinct."

"What?" Liz asked, trying to decide if her dad was being serious.

"The killer instinct's not taught. It's no hesitation. No thought. No worry. When I used to get guys down on the ground and pound their skulls into concrete—mmm, mmm, mmm, like that—I wouldn't stop because there was blood. The more blood the harder I worked them over. I meant to kill them. I mean...I never did, but they remembered me. You...," Daryll explained, "you wouldn't do that. So you ain't got it. Nothin can change that."

"Liz," Mary called from the kitchen. "Are you planning to spend any time with your mother, today?"

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On the drive home from her parents, Liz felt confined, her muscles stiff. Her neck ached as if she were slowly being strangled. She thought about what her dad said. She felt her skin crawl. She jumped and shook her hand when she saw what her grandma Bert called a piss ant.

That ant made her think of the strange things grandma Bert had given her to play with when she was a kid like pots and pans for blocks and medicine bottles filled with bugs. When Liz
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put the red and black ant together, the medicine bottle became a stage for a Darwinian drama—a fight-to-the-death. Liz remembered being mesmerized by the ants' crisp unsettledness. When she first put the ants together, she was too young to know their instinctual hatred of the other. She thought they would be less lonely together. She put a tiny stick in the bottle, a pretend tree for them to climb. She observed and learned things like fewer air holes caused the ants to fight less. Without enough air, they hardly noticed the other. Unable to breathe, they frantically paced the curves of the bottle, the seams, poking their antennas through the tiny air holes, reaching for freedom, for life. Their fight to the death became a fight for life as red and black ant cased their plastic prison. Eventually, curling up, round as a ball. Given more air, however, they became agitated, acutely aware of the other. The red always attacked first. The black hid and occasionally attacked but only after the first round of fighting as if survival in its new world required it. When Liz had enough, she would release the fighting ants onto the sidewalk where they scurried off into the grass, forgetting their murderous intentions. Liz remembered why she quit playing with medicine bottles—the ants haunted her when she closed her eyes.

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Pulling up to her house, Liz honked at her husband, Ray, who was making his second pass with the lawn mower, cutting a grid pattern in shades of green. Carmen, the family Doberman, sat on the porch, watching. Ray waved and kept working while their son, Matt, threw the basketball at his mom.

"Want to play horse?"

"Later?"

"You scared?"

"Yeah." Not thinking about basketball, she said, "I think I am."

"O-kay. Shoot that one then."

Liz aimed the ball. It skimmed the rim before slowly falling in. After pushing Matt's baseball cap over his eyes, she asked him if he wanted to go to the movies.

"Now?"
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"Well, soon, I guess. We could see *Crocodile Dundee*."

"But…Jason's on his way over. Dad said he could spend the night, so we can save the Princess…ya know, *Mario Brothers*."

While shooting the basketball, Matt told his mom he and Jason were going to defeat King Koopa. He said they found out about a glitch where they could make Mario throw fireballs, giving them the power to melt Koopa's disguise, learning the identity of their true enemy.

Liz looked over at Ray who had turned off the lawn mower and was walking toward her and Matt.

"Hello, my princess," he said and kissed Liz.

"Your design looks great."

"You think?" Ray stood nodding his head as if answering his own question.

"How was football practice?"

"Good. They had a scrimmage and Matt played both ways, offence and defense."

"He must have been hot in this weird weather," Liz said with concern.

"Yeah, he was pretty sweaty. I'll tell ya what though, he might be little, but…" Ray nodded and smiled, "he can hit some heads."

Ray pointed at Carmen, whose ears perked up as if waiting for something to happen.

"Look at her," he said, "I ran her for almost an hour, and she doesn't even look tired."

While Ray stroked Carmen's head, Liz thought about her dad, then laughed outloud.

"What?" Ray asked her, becoming amused himself at Liz's sudden giddiness.

"I was just thinking how Dad had a melt-down that time we brought Carmen to their house. Remember that?"

Ray and Liz paused, huddled around Carmen, laughing, lost in memory.

As if his memory played on an invisible screen, Ray pointed his finger into the air, "I remember that your dad kept saying, 'Here we go. Here we go,' then he kind of shrunk up, didn't he? I had no idea he was afraid of Carmen, so here I am letting Carmen walk right towards him as he backed into the corner. He locked himself in his room, right?"

"Yeah, but he could barely get there because he couldn't run…" Liz said, gargling her words with laughter. "His legs...I thought he was going to pee."

As the two laughed, Matt's basketball bounced off the rim, nearly hitting Liz in the head. Liz passed the ball back to him, teasing him about his free shots.

"Want me to rent a movie?" Liz asked Ray.

"Movie?...on a gorgeous day like this? No way, I'll be out here all day."

"Do you care if I catch the last matinee?"

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On her way to the cinema, a strange sense of liberation came over Liz as she crossed the suspension bridge. It felt as she imagined a dog might feel realizing the zap from the invisible fence only hurts for a second.

Always ready.

"Like I'm not," she said out loud, surprising herself. Looking back she recounted times she willingly risked her own safety to help others. In high school, she confronted a big guy who had trapped his tiny girlfriend between two rows of lockers, smacking her in the face whenever she tried to move, while a crowd of students, some athletes, stood and did nothing.

If you're going to hit someone, hit me.

She had actually said that. And more than once. "I never learn," she thought remembering what happened to her the first time she had used that line trying to stand up for her sister Marie who had provoked the anger of some drunk kids in the woods. Liz was ready then.

For Liz, ready also meant anticipating an attack. This translated into her mapping escape routes wherever she was, even in her own home. Although she never actually tried them out to see if they worked the way she did when she was a girl. Then she practiced contorting her body, hiding on closet shelves and inside storage bins. There she had imagined reacting impulsively and violently if confronted by an attacker. She imagined herself pouncing on a man's face with her hands and mouth, her fingers scooping out his eyes and squeezing them into gelatinous goo while her teeth gnawed off his nose. Liz knew this plan sounded funny, yet to her the thought of
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her attacking so ferociously made the fine hairs on the back of her neck and on the top of her arms stand erect. What upset her wasn't the fear that she couldn't do it, but in knowing that she could. Marveling at the strength of those tiny hairs, she almost hit a woman who ran out in front of her car, trying to get to her movie on time.

By the time she actually walked inside the theatre, her movie had already started. She stood stunned by the darkness inside the nearly sold-out showing, waiting for her eyes to adjust. Never had she stood so long without being able to see empty seats. Sensing annoyance from those around her, Liz felt a rush of heat flow to her face and a scratchy feeling of warm skin irritated by wool.

Having seen *Fatal Attraction,* her mind kept replaying the movie's disturbing scenes. They mingled with her own memories. On her drive home, she saw the suicidal image of Alex Forest—her mascara blackened face flickering on and off the screen as she flipped her lamp switch to the score of *Madam Butterfly* then later her enraged gouging of her own leg meat. Liz wondered if the anonymous woman sending the Forget-Me-Not cards to her dad on his birthday and national holidays, too, jabbed herself in the leg with a cleaver as she waited for her point to be received, in the mail. Maybe she stood outside, hidden from view, savoring the pain of refusing to be ignored. Liz was glad the woman kept her identity hidden.

Liz continued to associate the movie's characters with real life. Beth, the mother character, without hesitation, chose to shoot Alex, her husband's enraged lover, dead. From this act, Beth earned her husband's respect and the audience's. This scared Liz. When someone in the audience cheered for Beth to "Kill the bitch," Liz had held her breath. She wanted to hide as the audience cheered when Beth finally shot Alex dead, all happy at the sight of her dead body floating in the bathtub, no air bubbles left to expel. This scene made Liz think of her own mom. How she must have looked floating in her bathtub, the sleeping pills beginning to take effect. She imagined that before her mom slipped under the water, her dad tried to save her. That his hands

dialed the ambulance instead of circling her throat. Liz saw what it must feel like to have your fight slowly flung out of you. It felt empty like hunger only more expansive and desperate.

When Liz got home from the movie, Matt and Jason were playing *Mario Brothers*. She listened to the eager sound of their voices. They talked of upside down worlds and glitches in the system.

"Did you save the princess?"

"Almost." Matt laughed.

"Mom, we made it to the castle but…"

"The princess is in another castle," both boys sang out in unison.

"Watch this, Mom."

"How'd you learn that?"

"It's easy."

"Not for me."

"All you do is keep at it. When you figure it out, you save the princess."

As a treat, Liz made the boys popcorn, the old fashioned way. She enjoyed the sound of simmering corn and listened, patiently, to the stovetop music she made as she shook the skillet back and forth. She put extra popcorn in the pan so that the lid would rise in climax, telling her to extinguish the flame. She had prepared enough batches to know better, still, she kept her hand close for too long and an escaping kernel landed on her, scorching her skin. This time, she rubbed a piece of the butter on the spot and noticed a sprinkling of scars.

Liz sat with the boys as they ate popcorn and drank root beer. Matt let her take a turn on the Nintendo. But she was no good—her wrists locked up. She sat, wishing she were a more skilled player.

Although Matt and Jason stayed up later than they were usually allowed, they woke early, to see if they could, as Mario and Luigi, find their way to the next world. They sat next to each

other, legs crossed, knees touching, while Carmen rested her auburn head on top of both their knees. When Liz turned the TV off so they would get dressed for church, the three ran wild. Matt, Carmen, and Jason chased each other around the center wall of the house, through the kitchen, the living room, down the hallway, and back again.

Liz knew running in the house could be dangerous, but she enjoyed the laughter. As she yelled, "Alright, that's enough," Jason tripped. Liz felt her stomach rise to her throat. Jason had been running at full speed, so when he tripped, he went airborne. His arms reached forward, outstretched as Super Boy. His small torso rose up, then out and above the dog's large chest. He floated, smiling on his way down and surprising Carmen as he flattened her ribcage into the kitchen floor. Ray heard the thud and the ferocity of Carmen's bark from the bathroom. Liz felt the bass of it vibrate her heart. Carmen's teeth seemed to grow bigger in those few seconds. Ray flew out of the bathroom, shaving cream diving off the sides of his face. Both parents held their breaths the moment Carmen took Jason's wrist in her mouth. Carmen's jaw shook with nerves, fighting her natural instinct to defend herself with an attack. As Jason impulsively tried to pull his hand out of Carmen's mouth, it looked as though she held his hand, as a mother might, scolding him for scaring her. When she let go, she licked that spot where her teeth had rested, marking the boy with only her sticky, wet scent.

Mary waited for the neurologist to answer. He fidgeted, looked up at the ceiling, then back, finding Mary's eyes where he left them.

"Is it normal?"

"He's experienced a frontal lobe disturbance."

"But would that make him ... psychic. Him of all people?"

"It's not unusual for someone with a blood clot this size to behave abnormally."

"How'd he get it?"

"Usually a blood clot this size is formed by a hit to the head. Has he fallen?"

In her dad's pre-op room, Liz sat in the hospital chair watching the rhythmic drops of liquid connect and enter her dad's vein. Her mom laughed and Liz pretended to know why. She looked at her dad's face and saw that brain surgery didn't seem to frighten him. In fact, he seemed strangely happy. Benevolent even. She looked at her sisters, her mom, her dad. They gave the impression of a happy American family. Blue collar, hardworking, loving.

Good Sam Hospital had assigned Liz's family and one other family to a special waiting room. While Daryll was having a blood clot cut out of his brain, this other man was having his brain put back together after having fallen off his just purchased motorcycle. Inside this room, with its free coffee and hot chocolate and cable TV, Liz noticed a strange connection between the two waiting families. She listened and watched as her mother and the mother of the other man in surgery spoke to each other, nodding as if understanding, their responses showing no regard to the literal meaning of their words.

"Evidently, it's normal. . ." Liz overheard her mother say.

Nodding, to her mother, "He hadn't even driven the bike two miles."

"Didja know it's normal for a man with a blood clot on his brain to talk on the phone before it rings?"

"We don't even live two miles away from that dealership. Not two miles."

"I thought he was drinking too much Nyquil."

"He finally was getting his life together."

As the two women sat arm in arm, rocking themselves, speaking some nonsequitur language, Liz felt it difficult to maintain her calm façade. She was afraid to speak. In that room, it was as if the families gained some kind of x-ray vision where they could penetrate each other's hard shells. Liz wanted what was inside her kept intact, so she paced back and forth, hardly speaking. Her youngest sister, Lynny, read nursery rhymes to the little girl whose dad's brains the doctors were trying to put back together.

"Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the Kings horses and all the Kings men couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again."

"Poor Humpty Dumpty," Lynny told little Alice, tucking the girl's hair behind her ears. "He didn't have a good doctor like your daddy." Putting the book down, Lynny asked the girl, "How 'bout we watch cartoons?" The little girl never said yes or no. She simply looked at Lynny and smiled back her answer.

Lynny held Alice's hand and walked over to the TV. As she passed Liz, Lynny opened her eyes wide as if saying she didn't realize the connection between Humpty Dumpty and the girl's dad until she'd already read the rhyme. Liz gestured to Lynny not to worry. Liz could tell that the girl whose mother forgot to brush her hair was grateful for Lynny's attention. Here in this room, words themselves were meaningless. The sound of her sister's voice, the rhythm of the verse, and the feel of her hand inside the little girl's overpowered the literal meaning of this nursery rhyme or any metaphorical connection Alice might have made with her father's injury.

Liz imagined Humpty Dumpty's eggshell body and wondered if when he fell he only shattered that white hard outer self, leaving his egg body's papery-thin membrane intact. Without his private fortress to hide his real thoughts and feelings beneath, Humpty Dumpty would not be

able to lead the King's men in battle. Those young men enamored with Humpty Dumpty's powerful size would now learn what really made the man tick. When he tried to speak that first time without his shell, Liz wondered if raw honesty frightened the men who followed him and if they averted their eyes. Liz felt certain that the loss of his shell would've changed how he interacted with everyone, greatly affecting his relationships with his friends, his wife, and children. Maybe that's why the King's men couldn't put him back together again, Liz thought as she stared out the waiting room's tinted picture window. Maybe they didn't want to. Maybe his vulnerability touched them, causing them to hide him, protect him.

Liz hoped that when Humpty Dumpty's wife and kids read the uncovered parchment of him that their hearts softened with empathy. This thought caused tears to well up in Liz's eyes, so she gestured that she was going for a walk.

Even though she heard it herself, Liz had a hard time believing her dad sensitive enough to have a psychic encounter. Because she'd been trying to ignore his strange behavior, she felt mad at herself for almost missing this extraordinary experience of her dad talking to her sister Michelle on the telephone before Michelle had actually called. She was amazed. Thinking about the events of yesterday's family dinner, Liz tried to remember everything. As she walked the hospital halls, she let her memory envelope her as if she were watching a movie, hoping to mine a detail she might have overlooked.

"Halo," Daryll had said in his typical style, then yelled to Mary who was in the kitchen.

"Hey, Babe, you gotta go get her 'cause they locked her up."

"What?"

"She finally did it. Aw yea, she's in the holding tank, yeup, yeup, yeup."

Pummeling the beef that would become chili, her mom yelled back, "Who did what? And what're you talking about?"

"She finally gave the little sucker what he deserved."

"Who?" someone asked.

"They got her. Yeup, she's in the holding tank. I knew it. I knew it."

Liz mouthed, "holding tank?" to her sister Marie, who shook her head and shrugged her shoulders. Their baby sister Lynny, who still lived at home, mocked her dad by grabbing the Nyquil bottle and pretended to guzzle it by making gunk, gunk, gunk sounds. Daryll repeated himself.

Mary yelled back at Daryll, "Have some more Nyquil why don't cha."

Potato masher in hand, Mary answered the now ringing telephone.

"Hello. . .Michelle?. . .What?"

"Yeup, they picked her up. I knew it. I knew it," Daryll kept repeating, still sitting on the couch.

"Hold on," Mary told her daughter Michelle. "Daryll, would you shut up, I can't hear."

"She finally did it. They got her though."

Mary squeezed her eyes tight, pressing hard against her left ear with the same hand that held the greasy potato masher. She gestured for Liz or Marie to get her something to write with, but eyed an envelope and a pencil once sharpened with a knife. Holding the phone between her shoulder and chin, she dried her hands then wrote down how to bail Michelle out of jail.

"What's happened," Liz asked when Mary hung up.

"I told her not to get mixed up with that weird guy, didn't I? Two hundred and fifty dollars, at least. I'll never see that again."

"Is Michelle alright?"

"Never listen. I told her. You can tell a person by their hands, and his was weird. Little pale pointy fingers. You can always tell."

"What happened?"

"Daryll, how'd you know the police picked up Michelle?"

"They got her."

Mary waved her hand at him in disgust. She counted her money. "I don't know if I have enough."

"Enough for what?"

"Your sister's in the county holding tank. Domestic violence."

"Well why is *she*—"

"*She* hit him."

"Oh. . . Mom, I have some money."

"Hmm. Maybe they take credit."

Mary turned off the fire from under the ground beef and onions. With her coat open, she left, walking out into dark winter air.

Before surgery, Daryll seemed calm and happy lying in the hospital bed, IV dripping, listening to his wife and daughters retell this story.

"I never heard of a holding tank before," Liz laughed.

"Neither did I till I married your dad," Mary said, smiling and shaking her head back and forth as her fingers stroked Daryll's tattooed arm.

"We thought you were overdoing it on the Nyquil," Marie told him.

"Holding tank," Liz repeated, and they all laughed, amazed at the power of that bloody clot pressing on his frontal lobe.

Liz walked to the cafeteria. She wasn't hungry but didn't know where else to go. She carried the scoop of cottage cheese with peaches around it to the register. In front of her was a boy about seven years old. He was very thin with thick blond hair cut so short that each course hair stuck straight up. He reminded her of the school picture she had seen of her dad. That picture always struck her as odd because the child in it was so small and her dad had become so large. The young Daryll's eyes seemed innocent, bright with hope. When the boy in front of Liz turned and smiled, she resisted the urge to touch his head. Instead, she smiled back at the boy in her imagination, the sweet, innocent one, the one barely resembling the man he'd become.

Liz ate her cottage cheese with a spoon. Sucking each curd into liquid before swallowing had a strange comforting effect. The tears that had been welling up since they wheeled her dad's

bed into the hallway for last goodbyes surprised her. Maybe she really did love her dad even though she had for years thought she simply pretended to care, pretended to be a good daughter. She swallowed an intense urge to cry convulsively without really understanding why she felt so sad and why she couldn't bear to let anyone know.

She focused her attention on that little boy. He had placed the paper napkin in his lap and periodically dabbed at his lips. His blue eyes had not yet clouded over the way her father's had. She wondered if her dad had been a boy when his eyes went murky. Liz tried to remember how old her dad had said he was when he and his friends would fill laundry bags with neighborhood cats and kill them for fun.

Daryll would always begin, "I hated those cats."

"I don't like cats either, but that don't give you the right to be mean to them," her mom would chime in.

Liz could see her dad's eyes brighten when he remembered the creative ways he and his friends enjoyed killing these cats.

Although they devised many ways, Daryll would often recount his two favorite methods. For individual sport, he'd steal a pillowcase off someone's clothesline and put one cat in it. Then he'd tie a piece of clothesline around the bag and hang it from either a tree or a hook on the porch roof. He'd pummel the makeshift punching bag until it dripped red and the cat's fur was unrecognizable. Mostly in the summer when the boys were hanging out, her dad and his friends would fill up a whole bag of neighborhood cats. Then they'd have a kind of contest to see whose cat would die the fastest. Each boy would pick one cat and a bag then they'd twirl it over their heads like lassos and fling it into a tree, debunking the whole nine lives theory since the kittens almost always died on the first try.

Liz marveled at her dad's lack of shame when telling this story. And she couldn't dwell on it too much because the moment she imagined her dad's blood lust, she had to look away, choosing, instead, to focus on the choir-boy picture of him.

What if her dad's father wasn't a drinker and a fighter but maybe a singer or a poet? Instead of hearing stories about the number of times her grandpa would hit her dad so hard in the

head that his little boy body would fly clear cross the room, her dad would have told her funny stories about her grandpa belting out a song or endearing ones about his ability to turn mean men into sweet pussy cats. Her grandpa would have taught his sons to project their voices instead of their fists. If her grandpa had put as much energy into his singing and his poetry as he did into drinking and fighting, Liz was sure that the little boy she remembered in the picture would never have taken such pleasure in doling out pain. Imagining her father as a little boy, growing up with less cruelty, less hunger, she saw the man he could have been, the words beneath his shell, and she understood why she felt so sad and ashamed of that sadness. She wasn't sad that she might lose her father and the relationship she's had with him. What made her feel as if she were going to explode with tears was the possibility of losing what could have been.

When she returned to the waiting room, she paused, taking a moment to collect herself, then entered averting her eyes. She hoped her red face and swollen eyes served as cover for the real words beneath.

Steam

Liz mashed her stuffing into the turkey's thick gravy, letting it ooze between the tines of her fork. She stirred it into the canned cranberry sauce that still wore the tin-can's markings. Its red jelly appeared to bleed into everything.

Even though Liz's aunt Dot and Bitsy had not driven together, they walked in one after the other just before dinner.

Mary had barely looked up from the pan of potatoes she was mashing, letting the electric mixer speak for her.

Before her aunts' arrival, the holiday tension shaped Liz and her sister Marie's defensive postures: Liz kept her eyes to the floor, pretending to be deep in thought while Marie stared into the kitchen gally, wondering what to do.

"Mary, can I do something?" her sister Bitsy called from her spot at the table as Mary's youngest daughter Lynny hovered, grabbing a finger-full of mashed potatoes.

"I don't know what that would be?" Mary answered in a higher-than-normal pitch while handing Lynny a beater to lick.

After Liz filled the water glasses with iced tea, she rubbed some lotion on her face to soften the salty stiffness left there from her annual cry-in-the-bathroom she'd performed after being blamed for her sister Michelle's annual storming-out-of-the-house routine. Returning to martyrdom, Liz carried folding chairs from the basement to place around the table. Marie flashed Liz an annoyed face for having beaten her to the job. No one dared to laugh when Michelle stormed back into the house looking for her forgotten car keys until Daryll, Liz's dad, asked, "Where'd Michelle go?" Liz responded by peeking her head into the "boys" room, marveling at Thanksgiving Day football and beer oblivion.

Sitting at the table, Mary's unmade-up face formed a familiar annoyed position that told everyone she wanted to get the whole thing over. Her heated face, pursed lips, and lifted brow made her face appear puffed up as if by steam under foil. She began to release little mouthfuls of frustration, little irritated sounds that scalded her on its way out. Her displeasure caused big-eyed high-pitched this-sure-looks-good comments as holiday fare was passed.

"In the name of the father" was Liz's dad's, contribution. He held his finger to his forehead and waited a few beats for everyone to put their forks down. Then he added, "and of the son," then paused again, cueing everyone to chime in with "and of the holy spirit, Amen. After the sign of the cross, Daryll pointed to Liz, indicating that she was assigned the task of saying grace.

"Let's go around the table and say one thing we're thankful for."

"I'll start." Mary chimed in. "I'm thankful that I *had* all my kids—"

"Huh umm," Matt interrupted clearing his throat and winking at his grandma.

"And grandkids." She winked back at Matt then glared at Liz then Daryll, who said,

"I'm thankful we can all share this great meal."

Dot, Mary's sister, was thankful that the turkey turned out and Bitsy, her other sister, was thankful that Dot said what she was thankful for, no one had a serious sentiment, so by the time it got back around to Liz, she decided to make a joke about how mad her mom was earlier and said, "I'm just glad Mom didn't get out the rolling pin."

Everyone except Lynny and Matt knew "the rolling pin" as an inside, family joke and laughed out their "Amens."

Lynny, who was in high school, picked up a whole turkey leg and began growling like a beast. Taking a big bite from her turkey leg, she laughed, releasing some of the bad air from the room.

"Mom, your grandma, was so mad that day," Dot laughed in her throaty smoker's laugh.

"What day? What're you guys talking about?" Lynny asked, twirling her drumstick between her fingers.

"I sure do miss Bert. Your grandma Bertt was a good old girl." Daryll said as he rolled his bread into a tube filled with butter.

"What'd Grandma do?"

"She got out the rolling pin, is what she did," Liz said and smiled at her mom.

Mary instinctively touched the spot on her head where her mother had hit her, not Dot, with the rolling pin. Mary looked at Dot, and both sisters chuckled, communicating something beyond memory.

"I can't even remember what we were fighting about, ya know?" Dot said to Mary while thinking what a bitch Mary had been that whole time she'd rented that apartment next to them, but she said, "Can you?"

"Not really," Mary told her even though she remembered how hot it was in the kitchen that day. Little air conditioning and less help. Mary remembered kids underfoot, hers and Dots. She saw herself heavy with sweat trying to get everything set-up for dinner while their mom sat at the table, oxygen in her nose, laying out the trays of meats and cheeses. She remembered how Dot came in, oblivious to the work needing to be done, and sat her big butt down and started making herself a sandwich. She didn't remember the details like who had said what and what had started two grown women to pull at each other's hair, scratching and hissing like tomcats fighting over territory. She still remembered the sound of the hard wooden pin though, cracking her in the head and how she couldn't feel the pain right away but could recognize the sound of each blow. It was the sound that made little horns pop out of her skull, the jarring sound of her mom taking Dot's side, the rattling of her emotions rolling around inside of her and flattening any sense of self-importance. It was the sound of you are nothing.

But that was a long time ago.

Liz looked at her dad's face to see if he remembered the rolling-pin incident the way Liz remembered it.

"No one hits my wife," he kept repeating, his reason for insisting Bert move out of his house that night then with a tearful face the next day begging her to stay.

Liz couldn't tell if in her dad's gravy covered plate he saw himself, shattered his reflection with each drowning of his bread.

"A good old girl. . ."

Liz scooped an extra spoonful of cranberry sauce, ate, and remembered. Intermittently, she stirred her turkey dinner into a feast of holiday soup that she eagerly swallowed. She remained in tune with dinner conversations, smiled and laughed appropriately, and made periodic "mmm" sounds.

As if she were watching a three-ring circus, her mind shifted back and forth between the rolling-pin scene and the present. Her memories in images, peripherally focusing on her mom and aunt Dot fighting in the corner and centrally on Grandma Bert's hands.

She saw the commotion from the corner of her eye. A comical image. Two large women hissing, spitting, dropping tears and drool, hands stuck in tangles of hair. She knew her grandma had yelled for them to stop because her side-eye remembers Bert's mouth moving. She remembered hearing a high-pitch, pressure cooker of a scream that seemed to subside as her grandma's hands began methodically mashing the luncheon meats set out for dinner. Grandma Bert's mashing did not stop with meat. She squished cheese through her hands. It's soft yellowness oozing through.

Bert's kneading picked up speed then stopped as her girls became caught in a tornado of arms. She reached for her mother's wooden rolling pin, swung its warning high above their heads. It teetered in the air as a top coming to the end of its spin. It wavered and crashed onto Mary's skull, poking a hole in the web of hair and scratch marks connecting the women.

Liz stared at the red swirls running through her mashed potatoes, remembering the ground up luncheon meats, remembering the feeling of not knowing what to do. Was she supposed to eat it, clean it up, or throw it away? She remembered her mother throwing it away, her grandmother, and herself. Nothing was clear.

Liz's belly ached with too much food and an unfulfilled yearning for a new story. As she took her last spoonful of Turkey dinner into her mouth, holding it there on her tongue, she found herself unable to swallow another bite.

Marked Fragile

He was born affected.

Lynny's mom and sisters never actually said get an abortion. They told her they would support whatever she *chose* to do. Her boyfriend told her to think of it like a car, "If you buy a lemon, you get your money back."

After the home test read pregnant, Lynny closed her eyes and saw her son's fish-like body swimming and dreaming life. That picture made her smile. Sometimes she giggled and talked to him. When she spoke to Little Louie, she'd make her voice squeaky like a dog's chew toy. She'd lean over, stretching her neck and lips, talking into the microphone that was her not yet swollen stomach. Then, in the way a visitor touches barrier prison glass, she'd place her hand where she imagined he pressed.

She never told anyone, but knowing he'd probably be retarded comforted her—he'd never come to know her as less than, never see her with judgmental eyes. She'd always know more than he could. That made him special.

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Every day for two weeks Mary phoned her daughters, Liz and Marie, asking if they'd had their blood drawn for the study yet. When it appeared that they were going to miss the deadline, Mary decided to take matters into her own hands, by drawing their blood herself.

After a couple false starts, Mary managed to fill the vials with her daughter Liz's blood. Feeling woozy, Liz let the cool concrete of the basement floor seep into her flesh. Lying there, she breathed deeply and wiggled her feet to get her blood pressure back up, hoping to look fine, unaffected, for her son's sake.
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Bursting with self-admiration, Mary smiled at her daughter, tapped her fingers. "Next," she called out, eager to draw her grandson's blood, ready for another self-affirming fix.

"I told you I could do it," she said to Liz then yelled for her grandson to hurry up, that it was his turn.

"Mom, wait," Liz pleaded. "I still feel woozy."

"Stay on the floor. I don't need ya."

"He'll be scared."

Matt didn't take his usual two or three steps at a time. Instead, he crept down the stairs, feet following outstretched hands that gripped the banister of which he peered over. He couldn't see his mom until he stood in front of his grandma, who grabbed his wrist. Then, seeing his mom on the floor, his face went even paler, his eyes widened.

"I'm okay." Liz told him, trying to stand, concentrating on breathing.

"Grand-ma?" Matt tried to pry his wrist free.

Mary let go and held up the needle for Matt to see.

"Ha, ha, ha," she teased.

Matt turned to run back up the steps, but by then Liz had composed herself and stood behind him. Her hands squeezed his shoulders for support. Liz fought her body's reflex to laugh at the gothic scene they created. The damp basement. Her own blood in viles. Her mother posed like a vampire laughing a macabre laugh. The summoning of the innocent. Liz knew Matt's fear of having his blood drawn in this way was grounded and not funny, yet she experienced the paradoxical exhilaration she felt watching a scary movie. She remembered how she had held Matt down when she'd taken him to the allergist. Then, he'd fought as the nurse rubbed the potential irritant on his open skin, kicking her. She wouldn't hold him down for this.

Liz whispered to Matt, "Please let Grandma do this."

"But. . .she"

"Sit here." Mary pulled Matt into the seat and reached for his arm. He withdrew.

"Are you sure you know—"

"I drew your mother's blood."

"And almost killed her."

Mary and Liz laughed.

"Matt, Grandma works at the hospital. How do you think she got this stuff?"

"She *stole* it."

Mary and Liz looked at each other, feeling the roar of squelched laughter in their throats Their eyes revealing surprised guilt. Neither denied what they knew to be true.

"Ow."

"Yeah the tourniquet pinches. But it works better when it's tight. Right Liz?

Liz smiled and kind of snorted, knowing her mom was referring to the trouble she'd had getting her blood into the first vial. "Does the tourniquet stay on or off," she'd wondered and had chosen wrong.

"Now, I know," Mary nodded, assuring Liz.

She tapped on Matt's vein the way she'd seen it done. She smiled, thinking that it appeared eager for the letting.

"Piece of cake," she said when she'd finished, impressed with her innate abilities.

Telling Matt he was an excellent guinea pig, she checked the labels and packaged them as if they'd come from a medical lab.

"I'll overnight this to the geneticist tomorrow."

"Thanks, mom."

"I'm good, ain't I?"

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While the nurses washed Marie's baby in the delivery room, took measurements, and accounted for all his parts, she thought she heard concern. Maybe they'd said Simian crease and hyperextensible joints. She definitely heard ten fingers and toes. Rich, her husband, kept repeating it's a boy, not knowing what else to say, thinking how many cigars to buy. When their
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boy cried, Marie opened her clenched eyes, releasing a dam of salty liquid. After some time, she looked at her husband and affirmed their baby boy's name. "Anthony."

Before visiting hours, Marie dressed in her new gown and robe and wondered if her slippers matched. She couldn't wait to show her mom and sisters the diamond earrings Rich had given her. She wondered who would notice Anthony's long eyelashes first. She'd never seen such lashes. Hearing her family's voices echoing down the hall where the nursery was, she felt a tinge of anger or disappointment, but she brushed it off and went toward their sounds.

"Hhh um," she cleared her throat.

"He's so pretty."

"Did you see his eyelashes?"

"How you feelin?"

The bombardment of questions and excitement over Anthony satisfied Marie. She held her hand behind her ear.

"Ooh."

"Nice job Daddy Rich," Liz said, laughing as she patted Rich on the shoulder.

"A diamond for every boy. That's what my mom got. That's what Marie'll get. "

Mary rolled her eyes. Liz acknowledged her with a smirk.

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An hour before her family arrived for Anthony's first birthday party that Liz was hosting for her sister Marie, she sent her husband Ray to the bakery to pick up their nephew's birthday cake. Everything was prepared except the bacon for the Hot Brown sandwiches. The recipe called for one pound of bacon, but Liz thought three would taste special. Although she'd never cooked bacon under the broiler before, she thought this method would allow her a few minutes away from the kitchen to finish decorating.
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Ray arrived with the cake to the screeching smoke alarm and flames shooting from behind the oven. Liz's first impulse was to run for Al, the fireman that lived next door, but stopped, thinking that would take too long. Ray filled a jug with water.

"No, it's grease," Liz yelled. "Is it salt, flour, or baking soda?

Ray went for the baking soda and Liz found the flour.

They looked at each other as if together they went, "Eeny Meeny Miney Moe."

When Ray opened the oven, Liz dropped the flour, grabbing, instead, her oven mitts and the flaming sheet of bacon. With her arms extended, she carefully moved toward the backdoor, trying to keep the grease flames on the cookie sheet. She panicked remembering how she'd gut laughed when her friend recounted how his father had burnt their house down in a similar way. She felt quivery imagining herself as her friend's father—running through the house with a flaming pan of grease, flames jumping onto drapes and upholstery.

"What the heck?" their son Matt said waving his arms through the smoke.

"Matt, go out front and wait for aunt Marie."

"What?"

"Go!"

Liz looked at Ray, "What am I gonna serve for dinner?"

"At this point, who cares? At least we have a house to host the party in."

Although Ray meant to make Liz feel better, to her his comment felt like a slam, so she pulled away when he tried to hug her then started opening windows.

The fire turned out to be a great party favor. It bound their conversations to the ridiculous. When they couldn't coax Anthony to even look at his own birthday cake or show any interest in it the way tradition expects, there was the fire. When Mary asked Marie what Dr. Gregory said about the size of his head or the fact that Anthony didn't make eye contact, they found heat in those beautiful eyes. When she said something was wrong, they laughed at the very sight of themselves sitting in the house in the middle of November with their coats on and the windows open exchanging smoke for cold air.

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Having worked as a unit clerk at the hospital for ten years, Mary knew people. To the lab tech she was friendly with, she explained the strange series of events that led to a geneticist wanting to study her family. She told him how her niece Margaret in South Carolina had a friend who was writing the first book on an inherited form of mental retardation called Fragile X syndrome. The scientist happened to stop by at the same time Margaret's brother Toddy was there for the summer. As soon as he saw Toddy he knew. When he learned that it was possible to collect samples from four generations, he sent out the collection kits. Mary complained that everyone except two of her daughters and their sons sent their blood. She explained that all she needed was a few needles and such. Her sister-in-law could draw the blood.

The lab tech toyed with her: "Naw Mary. Retarded? You?"

"Not me, my husband maybe."

For a moment they just stood facing each other, laughing like old friends.

"Whatchoo need baby? I'll give it."

Mary was disappointed that the results were not forthcoming. She guessed the guy got what he needed for his book and thought that was that. This turned out to be partially true. She discovered he'd sent the individual test results to her niece who made one copy only and sent it to her husband's sister to disseminate. Eventually, with prodding, she let Mary "borrow" the report.

That Saturday morning Mary called Marie to tell her she had the results of Anthony's gene test.

"What does it say?"

"I told you Anthony acted retar—I mean like Toddy. Didn't I?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your dad gave all of you a bad gene."
~~~

"What?"

"Drive over."

"Umm—"

"I'm making coffee. . .Marie, it's better to know now. Maybe there're programs or somethin."

That night Marie and Rich tossed the test results in the trash, deciding it meant nothing. They loved Anthony, and he was going to be fine.

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When she learned she was pregnant, Lynny went to her sister Marie. She wanted to know if it's really that bad having a retarded son.

"What do you think I should do?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Come on. That's what big sisters are for."

"No," Marie answered. Although she meant it emphatically, it didn't sound that way. Instead, it came across as hesitant as if she'd meant maybe, so Lynny kept at her. Her playfutone affected Marie. It contradicted the seriousness of what she was asking. Lynny's silliness caught Marie off guard. It made her face hot. She felt vulnerable as if the cold metal shield she usually wore came undone, leaving her raw and aware of things she normally felt protected from. She took her hands and held her face, spreading its moistness into her hair. With a chunky voice she said, "Look, I love Anthony and saying that you shouldn't have a baby because he might be like him is. . .well, I just can't."

"It's okay. Mom said, 'God only gives you what you can handle.'"

"What if the baby isn't sweet like Anthony but comes out like our cousin Kevin's boy, a vegetable? Can you handle that?"
~~~

It had scared Lynny when she looked into the vacant eyes of her cousin's nearly teenage boy, his broken X chromosome keeping him from talking and walking and using the toilet. Even before she asked Marie, she decided that if the amnio showed Little Louie to be a vegetable, she'd definitely abort. That kind of X would not be a special mark. That affect would mean no loving hugs. No laughing at the funny things he said or did. Just shitty diapers every day, which is what she said outloud.

As she said it, they both looked out beyond the glider where they sat, beyond the grass and back porch, the lawn, past the neighborhood boundaries to the sun blazing at the evening horizon, gold to blue. It gave a good fight, but fell beneath the weight of its own heat. At that moment, they said, in unison, "Shitty diapers every day" and laughed for some time.

Marie couldn't stop the water. It flowed from her eyes and her nose. She didn't heave or make noise. There was only water, inconsolable water.

"Don't tell anyone this."

"Okay."

"I wanted Anthony. It took three months. I was so proud when I found out. But. . .if. . .I knew that he would be. . .how he is. . .how hard. . .I wouldn't have. But I didn't know, and I'm glad. You know, so it's different."

Dream Creation

Rising flecks of burnt ash floated above. From her heart, Liz took a deep breath and blew, making the dust dance in a circle. She could almost hear dust's mourning chant. She listened, intently, recognizing a familiar beating, ta dum, ta dum. Four directions sounded off in unison, which Liz knew as her past and future, her now, and the music of her own heart echoing the beats of others. She looked to her left, to her right. She felt her own vibration. But the echo grew heavier. Louder. It pounded so hard it silenced her own sound. She felt pain for the first time and wanted to cry for it to stop but had not yet learned words. She willed herself to fly, but was tied down, tethered on each side. This ritual was violent. Her heart needed relief. As her heart swelled, she feared it would burst, exploding into dancing pieces of ash. She yearned for a place to house her heart and hid it in the magic of her family's song. Without knowing their meaning, she listened and repeated their bundles of sounds. As she spoke, words wrapped themselves in floating ash, a gift, the eternal drummer pounded onto Liz, forming flesh, writing the story of her.

Like this she lived, cocooned in her family's cyclical story, until the tempo of her heart changed. Beating out of sync, its withered rhythm called to her, speaking of its sickness. But her heart's words had no meaning because Liz no longer spoke its language. Still, she listened and nurtured it as a mother would. As if praying, she bowed her head, eyelids not quite closed, then she placed both hands over her heart, letting the vibration of her voice mingle with its strange beat. In this pose, Liz's mind wandered backwards and forwards, in and out. With her heart in her hands, she began to understand the meaning inside the bundles of words that formed her flesh. This knowledge fed Liz's heart and gave her strength to sing new songs, make new stories. Smiling and singing, she held her heart over her head, brought it to her lips, blowing new meaning into her flesh made word.

Illuminaries

A patch of fur stuck to the road, like a post-it of animal remains—part of its skin held tight by dried blood; part flapped in the wind. That tiny speck waved and called to Liz. Flagged her down. Drew her attention away from conscious driving. From the marks on the road, she imagined it was a truck that first ground its bones into dirt, opened its flesh for the birds of prey to enjoy. Perhaps it, too, was a daughter running willingly into burning lights. More concerned for duty than her skin. Had she not seen the signs? Liz nodded in reverence at her tenacity. Still waving that lifeless fleck made Liz think of her mother's limp dog Max, laid out in the street, still warm as if resting in the snow. That night, like this night, her eyes had followed tire tracks, weaving from where Max was to the driveway of a neighbor, who left no prayer card, nor stood under that spot light of the street lamp, smelling thick butcher shop air, listening to her mother's singing tears. A snow globe vision,Liz holding Max's body as white flakes danced, backlit by shiny dots of sky, like flecks of mica stuck in the road—a constellation of chances. *What if* she could read the blinking signs splattered over sky and road, could know their meaning? Liz drove past the tab of unburied fur, beyond memories of Max or her mother's tears, and held in a place where her life remained not yet her own. There she felt a strange kinship with the road. With its potential to take her someplace. With those tiny flecks stuck silently shining and eventually fading when left behind. On her return home, she grew hopeful as the signs were like a galaxy of fire flies or road stars, resurrected and exploding with answers she almost understood.

Feb. 29th

Hi D,

Remember me? I've missed you, too. A lot's happened to me since we last talked. Ray and I...wait, you don't know, I'm married. Yes, I am. No, I'm not too young. His name's Ray. He's tall and skinny. No, skinny's good. I feel safer that way. No. Don't even think it. I can take care of myself. Anyway, we bought a little house in a good neighborhood with the greenest lawn on the block. We have a son and a Doberman. Matt's a little football player, and Carmen, well, Carmen's okay, though you won't believe this—she's retarded. Yeah, she has this big indention in the top of her head. We knew she wasn't right when we adopted her, but we rescued her anyway.

Guess what? Today's my birthday. And you're my present! No, really. I was at my mom's house for a birthday dinner, and she told my fortune, the way grandma Bert used to with a deck of playing cards. It was so strange. Mom used two decks to increase my odds for a good fortune. Hmm, now that I think about it, it could have gone the other way. Anyway, it was good, weird, but good. It was weird because I drew three pairs: two Jack of clubs, an Ace of diamonds and an Ace of clubs, a Queen of hearts, and a Queen of diamonds. I don't remember exactly what it means, but I know what happened next. Mom handed me this little package, saying that it was just something little. Inside was your cute pink self. I don't know if she meant it as a kind of gag gift or a real one because she seemed really surprised when I started crying. I was that happy.

Well, I've got to run,

Liz

April 1st

D,

Yesterday, I forgot to give you this poem.

Liz

WATERMARK

It's a sign of faith to see
Mary on a concrete underpass.
It's not magic

or sorcery like showing your hand
to a stranger or throwing bones
in the dirt.

What if you saw your past
on the side of a wall
or in the stain on your shirt?

I've seen such a picture from my past
leaked onto a wall. If it were real,
I would change that grimace

on my father's face, move his hand
from my mother's throat
but not change her feet

that float above the ground
like a dancer's that point without blame
and bleed out of love.

If only she could leap off that wall
or I could scrub the water spot clean,
my past could be like the future,

a fortune to be told.

Bridge

But if Reality is. . .consciousness itself, then immediately comes the question of how can I change it? How can I make it better? Happier?

~Amit Goswami, PH.D.

While Liz heads toward the suspension bridge's center, it splits open and rises, the Ohio river rushing beneath. The grade becomes progressively steeper, causing a paralyzing fear to envelope her. Her legs, her arms, even her breath feels weighted down with indecision. She realizes the gap has grown too wide to cross and if she doesn't cross and the bridge continues to rise, she'll be tossed backwards, yet she can neither move forward nor backward.

Even as a girl, this dream in many forms taunted Liz. Back then, whenever she found herself on the rising bridge, she never refused its impossibly steep grade nor went back to where she started. Heart pounding, unable to move forward or backward, she'd force fingers through metal holes, grasping for life, feet dangling, until the bridge would close or she'd wake up, squirming on her belly. If she'd known how to drive, she wouldn't have dreamt herself throwing her car in reverse or even flooring the gas at the first sign of the bridge opening.

~

Driving over the real bridge, her mother at the wheel, Liz fell into a kind of trance, confused by the strange sensation of her real life resembling her dreams. She noticed the familiar off-balance vibration from her mother's tires, heard the bridge's song. Because the other side of the bridge was not visible, Liz took comfort in the murkiness of the fast moving river, tried to make out what floated beneath its surface, until its view became obstructed by cables and the bridges steep grade. Then she only looked at her mother, focusing on her singing as she drove past the center mound.

You're so vain. I betcha think this song is about choo. Don't choo?

The rushing fear Liz felt faded once they crossed the river, remaining her body's unarticulated rejoinder to its unacknowledged reply.

~~~~~

After waking up once then falling back into the same nightmare, Liz got out of bed and went for a glass of milk, being careful not to wake her husband. As Ray slept, Liz stood in the dark, illuminated only by the light inside the fridge. She still felt clammy and nervous and resisted the urge to call their son Matt's apartment, to check that he was okay.

She thought about her dream. It was still fresh in her mind, so she paged through each image as if it were a book, stopping suddenly when she realized she was no longer her own central figure, but a mere spectator. As a passive observer, she lacked the ability to help her son who had climbed out onto a telephone wire and then a strange water tower whose foundation had become unsettled.

"Mommy's coming," she had cried from her bed, a ghost's words. Awake. Her husband continued to sleep. Asleep again, she's back on that bridge—the car drives her toward the bridge's center, its open mouth.

Still standing in front of the open fridge, Liz drank her cold milk, remembering how her grandmother believed in the warmed kind and thinking of the stories her mother told of being made to drink it, gagging it down, gagging on its lingering smell. Liz couldn't remember ever being given warm milk, not even by her grandmother. When Liz licked the milk from her upper lip, she tried to touch her tongue to her nose like grandma Bert. *Do the trick* she used to beg, and then Bert would cross her eyes and lick her own nose.

Liz wondered if her grandma, too, had recurrent nightmares like this. She wished she were alive so she could ask her. Taking another sip of milk, she remembered something she'd long forgotten—her father's teddy bear dream. How in the middle of the night he'd scream, a jumper's scream, filled with terror and regret. How they all laughed when he recounted it. Her
~~~~~

father, dreaming himself a teddy bear. A teddy falling, falling, *never* jumping off that cliff. The tiger always chasing.

Liz missed her grandma and decided if she could change her dream, she'd dream of her. Back in bed she stared at the alarm clock. The red light moved through the dark as if it were a ship in fog, floating. 2:47 hung in the air. Liz felt the bridge before she heard its song. 2:47, a real-time beacon. It burned beneath her closed eyes as she straddled the boundaries between sleeping and waking.

Breathing through her mouth, she became aware of the milk's thin film left on her tongue. On the bridge, she licked her dry lips and became distracted by a sour smell. It emanated in the air. She moved her attention from the rising danger of the bridge's opening, from her fear of being swallowed, to search for the origin of that smell. When she looked up, there was a tower she'd never noticed before. Through its window, someone smiled. He tipped his hat and released the lever. Red lights blinking, the bridge began to close.

And then Liz pressed the pedal as far as it would go. One hand on the wheel, she waved with her other. She stretched her arm outside, feeling the soft hairs of the hot night air between her fingers, the bridge's vibrations singing her new night song.

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VITA

Education

University of Dayton, Master of Arts in English
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Conferences and Public Readings

Presented workshop "Face Off, *Robinson Crusoe*" at Wright State University's "Life in the Story" Graduate Conference, 2007

Presenter, LitFest 07, University of Dayton, 2007

Keynote speaker, Sigma Tau Delta induction ceremony, 2006

Hungry Eye magazine's Honored Reader, 2006

Co-presenter, 12th Annual Colorado Writing Tutors Conference, Colorado College, 2005
"Souvenirs from Collaborative Space: Using Notebooks and Worksheets in Tutoring Sessions"

Presented "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Love, Healing, and Hope," College of Humanities and Social Sciences Annual Conference, Colorado State University-Pueblo, 2005

Participant, 10th Annual Colorado Writing Tutors Conference, Community College Denver, 2003

Speaking Role at the JAG Leadership Awards in Washington, DC, Broadcast on C-SPAN, 1999

Workshop Presenter, JAG National Training Seminar, Cincinnati, OH, 1993

Activities

- Library Committee member, University of Dayton, 2006-present
- Brother Frank Ruhlman Award Judge, University of Dayton, 2007; 2008
- Editorial Staff, *Hungry Eye* Literary Magazine, 2004–06
- Active Member, English Club, 2003-06
- Festivities Committee Member, Southern Colorado Women's Poetry Series Award Ceremony, 2003-06
- Vice President, Sigma Tau Delta National Honor Society, Lambda Chapter, Colorado State University-Pueblo, 2003-04

Awards/Honors/Publications

- Capps Capozzolo Award for Academic Excellence, Colorado State University-Pueblo, 2006
- First Place, College Division, Southern Colorado Women's Poetry Series, Colorado State University-Pueblo, "Watermark," 2006; Lorna Dee Cervantes Judge
- First Place, College Division, Southern Colorado Women's Poetry Series, Colorado State University-Pueblo, "Blood Knots," 2005; Lorna Dee Cervantes judge

- Honored for Commendable Achievement Upper Division Category, The Writing Across the Curriculum Task Force and Southern Colorado Teacher Education Alliance, Colorado State University-Pueblo, 2004-05
- Dean's List, Colorado State University-Pueblo, Fall 2002 ~ Spring 2006
- Inducted into Sigma Tau Delta National Honor Society, Lambda Chapter, Colorado State University-Pueblo, 2003
- Inducted into Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society, Colorado State University-Pueblo Chapter, Fall 2005
- *Hungry Eye* Literary Magazine, "Modern Parable" and "Stranger Falls" Published, Spring 2005

Employment

Colorado State University-Pueblo, Pueblo, Colorado, 1/02 ~ 4//06
Writing Room Tutor

- Assess student writing and deliver appropriate instruction focusing on global and local issues during both face-to-face and online sessions
- Conduct specific tutoring sessions in English grammar and syntax
- Establish a comfortable and collaborative tutoring environment

Jobs for Cincinnati Graduates, Cincinnati, Ohio, 11/91 ~ 7/01
Employment Specialist

- Managed and led comprehensive student program following Jobs for America's Graduates Model
- Delivered classroom instruction, individual guidance, and academic remediation to at-risk high-school students
- Counseled and assisted students transitioning into the work world
- Worked in conjunction with area businesses to form corporate sponsorships
- Planned, marketed, and conducted job fairs, generating participation of over fifty businesses
- Developed job openings and assisted companies with hiring and placement
- Documented and reported student progress post-graduation

Accomplishments

- Received national recognition for outstanding performance
- Served annually on planning committee for city-wide Career Conference and Leadership Conference
- Consistently exceeded Jobs for America's Graduates' National Standards
- Served as Data Management Manager while performing regular duties

ADOW Personnel Services, Cincinnati, Ohio, 11/87 ~11/91
Manager

- Responsible for overall sales and operations of two area offices offering temporary and permanent placement services
- Delivered professional marketing program through established calendar of events

Accomplishments

- Converted office to paperless data management systems
- Initiated and implemented customer satisfaction program
- Planned and organized customer appreciation Monte Carlo Night for over 200 client companies

GPA Technical Consultants, Inc., Cincinnati, Ohio, 2/85 ~ 11/87
Message Center Supervisor

- Staffed and supervised thirty five message centers
- Recruited and maintained on-call staff of receptionists, ensuring 100% coverage
- Conducted performance and pay reviews. Prepared weekly invoices and management reports